

- Virus

# Covid-19 and Mental Health

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There is a wide consensus that the Covid-19 pandemic not only affects physical health, but also mental health and general wellbeing. The current pandemic is changing priorities for the general population, and it is also challenging the agenda of health professionals, including that of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. Everywhere in the world, psychiatric clinics are modifying their practice in order to guarantee care and support for persons with mental health problems, and those who are not mentally ill but are suffering from the psychosocial consequences of the pandemic. The need number psychiatric requiring of those help a reconsideration of current mental-health practices. From a psychopathological viewpoint, the current pandemic is a relatively new form of stressor or trauma for mental health professionals. It has been compared with natural disasters, such as earthquakes or tsunamis; although in those cases, the emergencies are usually localized, limited to a specific area and to a given time; people know that they can escape, if they want to or if they have the possibility to do so. Covid-19 has also been compared with wars and international mass conflicts. But in those circumstances, the enemy is easily recognizable, while in pandemic the “threat” can be everywhere and it can be carried unnoticed by persons next to each other. The mental health and psychosocial consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic may be particularly serious for at least four groups of people: those who have been directly or indirectly in contact with the virus; those who are already vulnerable to biological or psychosocial stressors (including people affected by mental health problems); health professionals (because of higher level of exposure); and even people who are following the news through numerous media channels. The pandemic and the related containment measures – quarantine, social distancing, and self-isolation – can have a detrimental impact on people’s mental health. In particular, the increased loneliness and reduced social interactions are well-known risk factors for several mental disorders, including schizophrenia and major depression. Concerns about one’s own health and (particularly that of their the loved elderly ones or those suffering from any physical illness), as well as uncertainty about the future, can generate or exacerbate fear, depression, and anxiety.



If these concerns are prolonged, they may increase the risk of serious and disabling mental health conditions among adult males and females, including anxious disorders including panic, obsessive-compulsive, stress, and trauma-related disorders.

A group at a particularly high risk is represented by infected people, physicians, and nurses working in emergency units and resuscitation departments. It is likely that when the pandemic is over, there may be a shortage of health professionals due to burnout and mental exhaustion. Another aspect which should be considered is related to stigma and discrimination toward infected people and their family members. Fighting social stigma toward those treating and caring for Covid-19 patients should be another priority for mental health professionals.

The internet is rapidly spreading very large amount of uncontrolled news. This information overload has been called “infodemic,” with the risk of fake news running faster than the virus itself, and creating uncertainties and worries. This should be regulated by a continuous interaction with media and also by national regulations.

Another consequence of the pandemic among mental health professionals may be that psychiatric problems will be considered less important than physical ones. It is, thus, important to continue to advocate for patients and their caregivers; patients often need longterm treatment, continuous support and advices, personal meetings with their physicians or therapists. Their rights to be treated, also in a period of social distancing, should be preserved even though mental health services may be overloaded by a considerable number of requests for psychiatric consultations.

Many of these psychosocial and mental health consequences of the pandemic will have to be addressed by psychiatrists and mental health professionals. Most probably there will be an increase in mental health problems, behavioral disturbances, and substanceuse disorders, as extreme stressors may exacerbate or induce psychiatric problems.