

Addressing mental health implications of the covid pandemic

Background

The COVID -19 pandemic has had broad a serious impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people around the world.¹ Either because of fear of contagion, stress caused by safety precautions such as lockdown, self- isolation and quarantine, or the effect on mental health associated with lost employment, income, education, or social participation.²

While many individuals have adapted to these new life conditions, others have experienced mental health problems, in some cases a consequence of COVID-19 infection³. The pandemic also has caused complications to access to mental health services and has raised concerns about increases in suicidal behavior.

However, according to the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2020 study⁴ none of countries reported evidence of an increase in suicide rates in the first four months of the pandemic (April–July 2020), and there was evidence of a fall in rates in 12 countries. Nevertheless, the GBD estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic has globally led to a 27.6% increase in cases of major depressive disorder (MDD) and a 25.6% increase in cases of anxiety disorders (AD) worldwide in 2020.

The greatest increases in MDD and AD were found in places highly affected by COVID-19, as indicated by decreased human mobility and daily COVID-19 infection rates. Females were more affected than males, and younger people, especially those aged 20–24 years, were more affected than older adults.

Regular public mental health interventions help prevent and treat mental disorders, however, prior to COVID-19, only a minority of people with mental health and substance-use conditions problems received any treatment, especially in low- and middle-income countries, but even in most high-income countries.⁵

¹ Policy brief: COVID-19 and the need for action on mental health. New York: United Nations; 2020 (<https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-covid-19-and-need-action-mental-health> , accessed 6 January 2022)

² Mental Health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact: Scientific brief, 2 March 2022 (https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci_Brief-Mental_health-2022.1)

³ Janiri D, Carfi A, Kotzalidis GD, Bernabei R, Landi F, Sani G, et al. posttraumatic stress disorder in patients after severe COVID-19 infection

⁴ Santomauro DF, Mantilla Herrera AM, Shadid J, Zheng P, Ashbaugh C, Pigott DM, et al. Global prevalence and burden of depressive and anxiety disorders in 204 countries and territories in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ Third round of the global pulse survey on continuity of essential health services during the COVID-19 pandemic: November– December 2021: interim report. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022 (https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-EHS_continuity-survey-2022.1)

This implementation gap can be represented as a breach of the right to health. It results in suffering in the population and has broad impacts and it is associated with economic costs. Reasons for this implementation failure include insufficient knowledge about Public Mental Health, insufficient norms about coverage of different Public Mental Health services, insufficient policy focus on this topic, or inability to early actions against COVID-19.

UN involvement

WHO recognizes these impacts and continues to view mental health as an essential health service that must be continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, WHO Member States have emphasized the importance of scaling up mental health services and psychosocial support as an integral component of universal health coverage and in preparedness, response and recovery for public health emergencies⁷. In response to the pandemic, WHO and partners have developed a wide range of resources to address mental health needs during the pandemic and continue to work to promote resilience and recovery.

WHO is closely working with countries and partners to help solve this issue. The UN Assembly has adopted seventeen “The Sustainable Development Goals”, in the framework for COVID-19 recovery that are addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. The third point called “Good health and well-being”⁶ also focuses on the prevention, treatment, and support of mental illness.

WHO's Technical Advisory Group on Mental Health and COVID-19 (WHO, 2021) aims to promote, support, and embed psychological support initiatives to all aspects of life.⁸

WHO has updated in 2021 the Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020, originally adopted by the World Health Assembly in May 2013. This plan builds upon its predecessor and sets out clear actions for Member States to promote mental health and well-being for all, to prevent mental health conditions for those at-risk and to achieve universal coverage for mental health services.

Useful links

The Sustainable Development Goals- Goal 3 (Good health and well-being)

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>

⁶ Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

(<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>)

⁷ Mental health preparedness for and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-Fourth World Health Assembly, Geneva, May 2021

(https://apps.who.int/gb/e/e_wha74.html)

⁸ Action required to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and service delivery systems in the WHO European Region Recommendations from the Technical Advisory Group on the Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19 in the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe; 2021.

(<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/342932/WHO-EURO-2021-2845-42603-59267-eng.pdf>)

UN: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health (May 2020)

<https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/UN-Policy-Brief-COVID-19-and-mental-health.pdf>

Mental health impacts of COVID-19 across the WHO European Region and associated opportunities for action (August 2022)

<https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/WHO-EURO-2022-6108-45873-66068>

WHO: Mental Health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact (May 2022)

https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci_Brief-Mental_health-2022.1

Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240031029>

Questions to consider

1. How accessible is healthcare in my country? Is mental health care accessible to all citizens?
2. What is the main problem in my country linked with mental health care? Is it lack of specialized workplaces, shortage of medication or general lack of education in this problematic?
3. How was the state of mental health in my country before and after the pandemic? In what aspects has it changed?
4. Is my country involved with WHO's, or other organization's support programs (such as Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan)?

Sources

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<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/342932/WHO-EURO-2021-2845-42603-59267-eng.pdf>

The Pan-European Mental Health Coalition [online]. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2021. Available from:
<https://www.who.int/europe/initiatives/the-pan-european-mental-health-coalition>

⁶ Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
(<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>)

⁷ Mental health preparedness for and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-Fourth World Health Assembly, Geneva, May 2021
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⁸ Action required to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and service delivery systems in the WHO European Region Recommendations from the Technical Advisory Group on the Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19 in the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe; 2021.
(<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/342932/WHO-EURO-2021-2845-42603-59267-eng.pdf>)