


Chapter 20

The Psychological and Behavioral Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Ways to Cope With Them

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the life after the outbreak introduced numerous changes and uncertainties that led to elevated stress levels in the societies and caused the emergence of various psychological responses for people of all ages to deal with this unprecedented transformation. Throughout this period, the children and adolescents were mostly influenced by being away from school and their peers while the adults had to struggle with the economic crisis and the increased workload both at home and at work. The older adults, on the other hand, had to contend with loneliness, feeling useless, and ageism. In this chapter, considering different age groups, how people are affected by the pandemic-related changes and their common psychological and behavioral responses and coping strategies will be presented. Some recommendations and common solutions to adapt to the “new normal” brought by the pandemic will be also emphasized separately for each age group.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had economic, social, and psychological changes that not only affected people from a certain status and age group but every individual from all age groups. These changes caused various psychological and behavioral responses and emotional difficulties. In a review, examining the studies conducted in different countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, high rates of anxiety (6.33% to 50.9%), depression (14.6% to 48.3%), post-traumatic stress disorder (7% to 53.8%), psychological distress (34.43% to 38%), and stress (8.1% to 81.9%) were identified in the general population (Xiong et

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al., 2020). In this chapter, common psychological and behavioral responses of children and adolescents, young and middle-aged adults, and older adults, their coping strategies, and some recommendations to mitigate the implications will be highlighted.

BACKGROUND

Stress refers to a particular relationship between an individual and the environment that is perceived as threatening for the person's well-being and unachievable due to exceeding demands (Lazarus, 1966, 1991, 2006). On December 31, 2019, with the announcement of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) that a cluster of severe cases of viral pneumonia of "unknown cause" were identified in Wuhan, people all over the world had to face an unexpected life-threatening event and tried to develop physical and psychological coping mechanisms to deal with it. On February 11, 2020, the virus was defined as COVID-19, and due to the alarming levels of "spread and severity" of the virus, this outbreak was classified as a global pandemic, a large-scale epidemic influencing millions of people around the world, on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). In pandemics the "threat" is unrecognizable; it can be everywhere (Kaniasty, 2019). Although the disease was named, COVID-19 itself and the life after the outbreak were still unknown, uncontrollable, and full of uncertainties, which lead to increased stress and caused emergence of various psychological responses. In pandemics, like the pathogen or virus that causes disease spreads among individuals and affects a wide range of people; the mental health problems can also spread rapidly as a symbolic contagion due to the uncertainty of the threat, misinformation by the media and individual as well as social-based panic responses (Khan & Huremović, 2019).

At the initial stage of the pandemic, Fiorillo and Gorwood (2020) proposed that four groups of people, namely the people who have contacted the virus, who have vulnerabilities for biological and psychosocial stressors (i.e., people having mental health problems), who are healthcare providers and who are extremely informed about the virus, might be under serious risk in terms of psychological and psychosocial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other side, women, younger adults (<40 years), unemployed people, individuals with lower socio-economic status, and those who live alone were also among the vulnerable groups for mental health problems (e.g., Pierce et al., 2020). Over the course of the pandemic, it was realized that the restrictions to prevent the contagion (i.e., lockdown, quarantine, and social distancing), the risk of death from the virus, the changes in the life routines, and high levels of adversities regarding accessing basic needs, and financial problems could be impairing for public's mental health regardless of their ages (e.g., Wright, Steptoe, & Fancourt, 2020). In other words, even though certain groups were identified to be potentially at higher risk, the pandemic affected people from all age groups.

From this perspective, in the first part, how children and adolescents are affected by the pandemic, and their psychological responses will be explained. In this section, initial psychological reactions to the pandemic and the quarantine process, psychological problems deriving from the remote education practices, and the psychological difficulties of children and adolescents with previously diagnosed psychiatric or developmental disorders will be discussed. In the second part, changes in the lives of the young and middle-aged adults due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting psychological consequences will be presented. In this section, which psychological problems are frequently seen due to the pandemic in young and middle-aged adults and which groups have a higher risk, how quarantine and working from home affects family life and parents, how the healthcare workers, who are among the profession groups

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