
Letter to the Editor

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH AS ISSUES CONSIDERED WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ADJUSTMENT DISORDER AND PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS

Dear Editor,

The COVID-19 epidemic, which started in the city of Wuhan in China in December 2019, spread quickly to the whole world (Fauci et al. 2020) and the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the epidemic as a “pandemic” in March 2020 (WHO 2020). It is seen that the whole world is involved in an intense struggle to cope with the disease since the announcement of the pandemic. Considering the possibility of increasing psychological and psychiatric problems in the coming days, it should be accepted that the mental health issue has a significant part in this struggle (Bao et al. 2020). Communal mental health cannot but be affected in an event threatening entire humanity. Therefore, an accurate assessment of the likely psychological effects during and after the pandemic process is particularly important for undertaking the correct prospective interventions. In the process of evaluating the mental symptoms of the COVID-19 pandemic as an identifiable stress factor, this letter will emphasize the adaptation process, adjustment disorder, stigmatization, and complicated grief.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Psychological Effects

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic is capable of generating multiple psychological effects on the whole of humanity

(Bao et al. 2020). Next to the uncertainties on the course and the treatment of the disease, apprehensions about one’s self and the loved ones getting infected by the virus could well exacerbate anxiety. The pandemic and the measures taken against it introduce the experiences of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety in the presence of physical and social isolation. Most of the investigations have reported adverse psychological effects including stress symptoms, depression, confusion, and anger (Brooks et al. 2020).

It is impossible for children not to be perturbed by this pandemic affecting the entire world population. Despite knowing the reactions given by children to traumas and adverse events, not much research has been made on children’s response to the conditions of the pandemic (Klein et al. 2009). Most studies have documented the harmful effects of psychological stress on children in facing adverse events. Anxiety, depression, lethargy, impaired social interaction, and loss of appetite are commonly reported symptoms (Jiao et al. 2020).

“Psychological Interventions for Adjustment Disorder” as a Subject to be Taken Seriously

Adjustment disorder expresses the inappropriate emotional and/or behavioral reaction during adapting to an identifiable psychological stressor. It is described as the continual rumination on the stressor and its effects at a severe level of worry and distress. The symptoms are characterized by stress reactions above the levels of those socially and culturally expected that cause distinct impairment of daily functioning (APA 2013).

A traumatic event has been defined in the DSM-5 as having faced death, serious injury, or sexual assault in a real or intimidating way (APA 2013). In adjustment disorder, however, the stressor events include non-traumatic stressful events such as interpersonal conflict, death of a loved one, unemployment,

economic difficulties, or disease (O'Donnell et al. 2019). Although it would not be appropriate to say here that there exists an effect that will lead to trauma reaction in every section of the society, it is highly possible to have a traumatic experience and the development of psychiatric disorders such as acute stress reaction or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the patients, their relations and the healthcare personnel who suddenly have to face the threat of death created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the society as a whole, we are of the opinion that it will be more appropriate to describe the process as a stressor, rather than a traumatic experience, that disrupts our adaptation to changed life circumstances. We can foresee that this approach will be valuable from different perspectives.

1. First of all, this process that disrupts our adjustment to life will be defined correctly and enable the prevention of being perceived as a “trauma”.
2. Evaluating the effects of the pandemic as causing “mal-adjustment” rather than being “traumatic” will also prevent the decrease in the significance of other problems in adapting to the economic downturn, unemployment, and isolation caused by the pandemic which is more relevant to the serious psychosocial effects.
3. It should be kept in mind that the symptoms being experienced may be the usual responses to a serious stressor. Not creating the perception that “the whole world is experiencing a trauma” would enable discussing and strengthening the mechanisms included within the diagnostic category of adjustment disorder for increasing adaptation.
4. This will support the thinking that we can still engage our coping strategies instead of perceiving powerlessness against the pandemic.
5. It will be emphasized that we still have actions for adaptation instead of desperation and hopelessness.
6. It will be possible to strengthen the solution-focused approaches on “how to continue living functionally” and “which areas to organize” rather than stressing the event itself.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With worldwide reporting of increased anxiety about getting infected (Angus Reid Institute 2020, Ipsos Mori 2020, YouGov 2020) it is obvious that the whole world is faced with a trying life event that should be evaluated well on how to handle its challenges. As life is to continue, it is important to manage the effects of the process now, to prevent increasing psychological problems in the future. It is known that mental traumas mostly have a course with recurrent symptoms of re-experiencing, flashbacks, nightmares, overstimulation, avoidance, and social withdrawal (APA 2013). However, it is more rewarding to see the community to be involved in mental and

behavioral efforts to cope with the pandemic itself and its adverse consequences rather than these trauma symptoms.

With this perspective, we believe in the importance of not encouraging the perception by any section of the society that epidemics, which humanity has been repeatedly exposed to throughout history, are traumatic life events. It should be heeded that not defining correctly this disruptive stressor will create further adjustment problems for humanity. Given the prediction that under the best circumstances 70% of humanity will experience the coronavirus infection, it will not be possible to cope with the pandemic by managing traumatic fear and anxiety and controlling obsessive-compulsive behavior. We need new coping methods and attempts to increase our strength.

It should be kept in mind that increased cases of complicated grieving would be included among the psychosocial problems created by the pandemic. The sudden and fast occurrence of mortality and the prevention of the rituals of loss under the imposed conditions of social isolation can prevent the normal process of grieving. It should be foreseen that supporting the grieving people would prevent complicated grief incidences.

Another important issue that needs must be emphasized is the stigmatization of tens of thousands of COVID-19 positive people, despite recovery, and marginalization as a threat for others by increasing the contagion. Hence, the circumstances of the fast increase in cases of COVID-19 positivity should also be foreseen by mental healthcare professionals as a factor that will impair communal mental health.

Therefore, our priorities should be focused on the interventions to protect adjustment and to reinstate it when impaired. It is certain that “being mentally more immune” to this pandemic will become possible primarily by well identification of the crisis causing stressors related to economics, disease, isolation and unemployment, determination of the measures to be taken up for safety, alleviation of anxiety by meeting the basic vital needs of the people and integrating the new conditions to live in a rational mode.

By means of this approach, acquisition of the pandemic related information from the correct sources, improvement of the social and vital support systems for families and friends, eradication of the stigma related to contagion, showing the possibility of normal survival under conditions of safety and the reorganization of the psychosocial services will gain importance.

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