

Psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on society



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Introduction

Pandemics have been seen at various stages throughout history. We can define a pandemic as an infectious disease spread across a large region or worldwide, potentially causing millions of excess deaths.

Pandemics have substantial economic, political, social and psychological effects on human society. They disrupt all aspects of the normal functioning of society; from work, production and trade to education and home life. Consequently, pandemics do not only impact those directly afflicted by an illness, but everyone whose processes of daily life are interrupted or altered, whose loved ones find themselves in life-threatening situations or whose mentality is affected by coverage on the news or on social media.

The COVID-19 outbreak, most commonly thought to have emerged in China, spread like wildfire across the globe. This event can be seen as a real watershed moment in modern history, both socially and psychologically. From the first official case on 11th March 2020 up to the present, with over 181 million cases and nearly 4 million deaths, the pandemic's impact has been immense.

Such pandemics leave a significant and indelible mark on the memory of society. The long-term consequences can be as abysmal as they are innumerable: although direct effects can be seen at the personal level, the influence of a pandemic on whole social systems is more complex and harder to measure. Such social and cultural ripples have attributed greatly to the overall psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and to a great extent the government has done little to understand or combat these phenomena.

Expert psychologists have described a new phenomenon known as "pandemic brain". Reflecting the impact of prolonged pandemic- and lockdown-related stress on people's cognitive functioning and psychological condition. From the disruption of daily routine to life-threatening experiences, the pandemic has effected society's very neurobiology - with non-English speaking communities hit particularly hard. Social isolation and loneliness, experienced disproportionately by members of the migrant community, have had profound

impacts across multiple regions of the human brain. On top of the stresses faced by migrants as part of daily life, lockdown has caused many to be cut off from their support networks and unable to socialise with family and friends.

For diaspora groups such as the Turkish and Kurdish community, there has been significant hardship around the COVID-19 pandemic. Little public support has been made available for such groups, and, even with strong initiative from local community groups and organisers, they have struggled to cope with the economic, social and psychological effects of the crisis.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on all humanity, RWCA's research will demonstrate that the effects on non-English speaking diaspora groups have been almost double.

Summary of Key Findings

This research was completed with 99 individuals, 76% of whom were women and 21.5% men; with 2.5% from LGBTQ+ demographics. 20% were in the 26-35 age group, 53.8% between 36-45 and 20% between 46-55 years of age.

General psychological state

While only 9% of the participants said their mental health condition was "very good", 26% stated that they had a "fair" mental health situation, and 29% said their mental health was "poor". 6.5% of those surveyed commented that their current psychological state was one of "despair". Most results reflect the ongoing nature of the crisis, showing no break or change in the psychological states of those surveyed in the last year. Some people commented that the delay in lifting COVID restrictions has brought them back to square one of their psychological healing process.

How often have you felt depressed and unhappy in the last year?

Only 5% of participants stated that they faced no depression whatsoever, and 9% "only very occasionally"; while 38% stated that they felt depressed "every now and then". 48% of participants stated that they felt depressed or unhappy "very often".

Note: The psychological effects described above seemingly did not start until **3 months into the pandemic**. It is possible that most people did not initially believe that the pandemic would last over year; but that after 3 months of increased unemployment, young people on furlough and older people in mandatory isolation, the reality set in and depression began to increase.

How have your social relations/interactions been affected?

46% of participants responded that all their social relations and interactions were affected. 35% said the same of “most” of their social relations. Only 19% stated that the pandemic had very minimal to no impact on their social relations. Family relationships, working relationships, friendships and all kinds of social interactions were interrupted by lockdown and the tier system for over 81% of our survey takers. This has contributed to feelings of despondency and hopelessness throughout the pandemic.

How has your psychology affected your work or ability to carry out a set task?

57%% of individuals surveyed reported a significant effect on their motivation to carry out tasks. 19% reported “some effect” in terms of motivations and hours worked. 20% stated that the pandemic had “very minimal” impact, and only 4% reported no impact whatsoever.

In the last year what affected your psychology?

- Not been able to see my loved ones
34%
- Being isolated from the outside world and social life
37%
- Economic status
14%
- Unemployment
6%
- Disruption of children’s education
9%

Do you think the pandemic will have a long term impact on your mental health?

- Yes
62%
- Maybe
1%
- No
9%
- Maybe
1%
- I don't know
28%

Do you think the end of the pandemic and lifting of restrictions will have a positive impact on your mental health?

- Yes
53%
- No
3%
- I don't know
44%

From whom did you receive the most support during the pandemic?

- Community organisers/community centres
51%%
- Local council
5%%
- Neighbours
2%
- Family and relatives
2%
- Friends
27%

- Other
13%

What were the most organisations you benefited from most during this period?

- Gov.uk
13%
- NHS
9%
- Councils
2%
- Voluntary community centres
40%
- I did not benefit from any organisations
36%

The above are examples of 25 questions asked in our survey, which was conducted in Turkish. Our findings illustrate the long-lasting nature of the impact of COVID-19, and demonstrate that the social and psychological effects of the pandemic cannot be isolated from economic factors.

Most importantly, the results indicate that over the last 15 months, state institutions such as local councils have been seen as largely ineffective in terms of addressing the above concerns. Public information has been weak and unreliable, and a lack of clarity about the future has only worsened the psychological impact of the pandemic on diaspora communities. Public organisations have also failed to adequately educate people on issues relating to the pandemic, particularly in regard to fighting misinformation and fear-mongering on social media and other platforms.

Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on society as a whole, not least by driving many into a vicious cycle of psychological problems. In order to minimise these psychological effects, especially for non-English speaking diaspora groups, the following measures are to be recommended based on RWCA's research findings:

- Introduce local Turkish-language stalls and sessions to educate people on the basics of COVID-19;
- Introduce free helplines with translators (*phone a friend* concept)
- Organise local funding to support families and individuals with economic difficulties due to increased unemployment;
- Arrange meetings between local organisers and community centres to improve working relations and benefit from increased cooperation;
- Organise local home visits;
- Conduct education to promote the vaccine in the Turkish and Kurdish-speaking community;
- Local councils to organise more opportunities for sports and physical activity, improving neuroplasticity;
- Local councils to facilitate hosting of free music playlists, organise more music-based activities to lower stress levels and improve mental resilience;
- Local councils to make space for communities to practice mindfulness and meditation in an accessible way;
- Local councils to create more employment opportunities for "link workers" at local community centres, for direct contact with communities in their own language.