

Increased psychological well-being after the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic

July 17 2020



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Expectations for our mental health during and after the corona lockdown were pessimistic, but thus far the situation has not turned out to be quite as bad as feared. Danes, and in particular Danish women, appear to have reacted with reduced psychological well-being as the infection rate and death toll peaked in the beginning of April. But already three weeks

later, the general psychological well-being—as measured by the World Health Organization's well-being index, WHO-5—had moved in a positive direction.

This is shown in a recent survey by a research group, which includes Søren Dinesen Østergaard who is professor at the Department of Clinical Medicine at Aarhus University in Denmark, and affiliated with the Department of Affective Disorders at Aarhus University Hospital—Psychiatry.

"The proportion of Danes with a well-being index of 80 or above, which is a sign of great thriving, grew from 22 per cent at the end of March/beginning of April to 28 per cent three weeks later, i.e. at the end of April, when the same people were asked again. This seems consistent with the development of the pandemic in Denmark between the two rounds of the survey. Namely, a significant decline in the rate of infection and the number of corona-related deaths, which led to a gradual reopening of the Danish society after a long period of lockdown," says Søren Dinesen Østergaard.

The WHO-5 well-being index is also used by general practitioners to screen for depression. The WHO-5 consists of five simple questions and the resulting well-being score ranges from 0-100, where higher scores represent higher psychological well-being. If the score is below 50, it is indicative of depression.

"The proportion of respondents that scored below 50 fell from 26 per cent to 20 per cent from the first to the second round of the survey. In absolute figures, the average increase in the well-being index slightly above 3 points, which is not a big difference. However, it nevertheless shows that there is light at the end of the tunnel—and that's a story worth telling," says Søren Dinesen Østergaard.

He is pleased to be able to deliver some good news during very difficult times.

"Our results indicate a clear and plausible correlation between the intensity of the corona pandemic and the psychological well-being of the Danish population. With a bit of luck, it may also be a predictor of how things will go elsewhere, for example in the United States and in South America where the coronavirus is currently on the rise. However, not all societies resemble the Danish—and that no one knows if, when and how a potential second wave of the pandemic will affect the world," says Søren Dinesen Østergaard.

He also emphasizes that the present study does not uncover how people with mental disorders, who may be a particularly vulnerable group with regard to the [psychological impact](#) of the pandemic, have fared. For this reason, his research group is currently conducting a survey specifically targeting people with contact to the [mental health](#) services. The results of this follow-up study are expected to be published later this summer.

The research results—more information:

- The study was carried out as a survey conducted by Epinion based on the WHO-5 well-being index. Epinion received payment for carrying out the survey. A total of 2458 people participated in the first wave of the survey, and 2149 from the same group also participated in the second wave of the survey. The results are weighted so that they are representative of the Danish population on a number of parameters.
- The following were partners in the project: Professor Kim Mannemar Sønderskov and Professor Peter Thisted Dinesen from the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University, Denmark, and the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, respectively; and Postdoc Ziggi Ivan Santini from the

Department of Public Health at the University of Southern Denmark.

More information: Kim Mannemar Sønderskov et al. Increased Psychological Well-being after the Apex of the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Acta Neuropsychiatrica* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/neu.2020.26](https://doi.org/10.1017/neu.2020.26)

Provided by Aarhus University

Citation: Increased psychological well-being after the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic (2020, July 17) retrieved 18 December 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-psychological-well-being-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

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