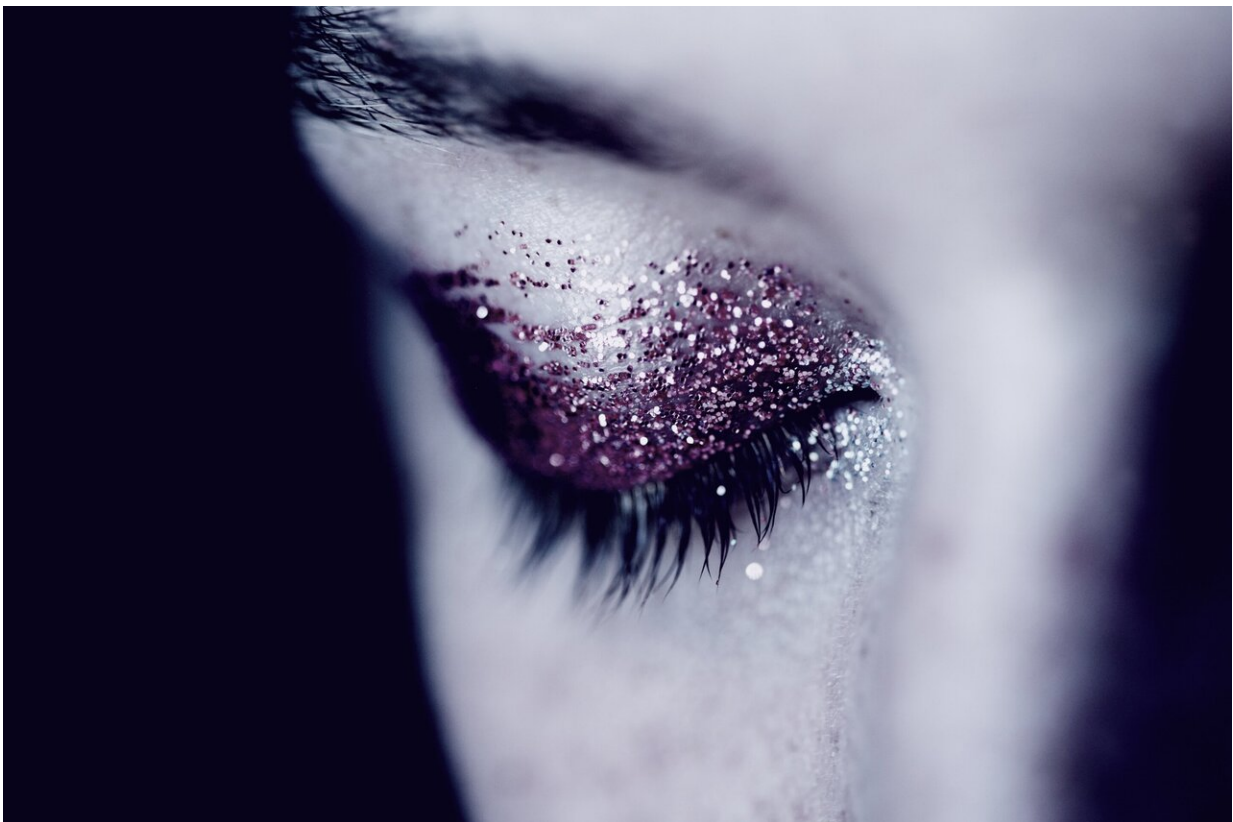# People with coronavirus symptoms more likely to have psychiatric disorders and loneliness

July 13 2020

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

People who have or had COVID-19 symptoms are more likely to develop general psychiatric disorders and are lonelier, with women and

young people more at risk, says a just-published study co-authored at Cambridge Judge Business School.

Having a job and living with a partner are significant protective factors against general psychiatric disorders and loneliness, says the study in the journal *Psychiatry Research*, based on 15,530 UK respondents, which is described as the first such large-scale, nationally representative survey in a developed country.

Although there has been previous research on specific coronavirus-related disorders such as anxiety, depression and insomnia, prior to this research we knew "little about the broader psychological impact of the pandemic on a wider population", says the study in the journal's September 2020 issue.

"Only focusing on specific disorders underestimates the psychiatric burdens of the pandemic in more subtle forms and overlooks the needs for psychiatric care of the people who have not been clinically diagnosed," the study says.

"Although the minor psychiatric disorders are often less urgent concerns of the public health policies, they are not negligible given the large proportion of the population that have been affected," says the study co-authored by Lambert Zixin Li of Stanford University, who holds an MPhil in Innovation, Strategy & Organisation from Cambridge Judge Business School (MPhil 2018), and Senhu Wang, a Research Fellow at the Centre for Business Research at Cambridge Judge Business School, who holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Cambridge.

The study measures general psychiatric disorders based on the 12 items in the widely accepted General Health Questionnaire, which looks at factors ranging from depressive anxiety symptoms to confidence to overall happiness, while loneliness was assessed by a question adapted

from the English Longitudinal Study on Aging about how often respondents felt lonely in the previous four weeks.

"Loneliness is linked to long-term health outcomes including all-cause mortality, so public health policies need to be aware of the (mental) health consequences of the disease control measures," the study says.

The research found that 29.2 per cent of all respondents (representing the general British population) scored '4' (the "caseness" or clinical referral threshold) or more on a five-point scale for general psychiatric disorders, while 35.86 per cent of respondents sometimes or often feel lonely; further analysis of the results showed that those who have or had coronavirus symptoms were more likely to have such disorders or feel lonely.

"People with current or past COVID-19 symptoms were perhaps more likely to develop general psychiatric disorders because they are more anxious about infection, and their greater loneliness may reflect the fact that they were isolated from family and friends," says co-author Senhu Wang of the Centre for Business Research at Cambridge Judge.

Women and young people (aged 18-30) who responded were significantly more at risk from general psychiatric disorders and loneliness, which the study says may reflect the fact that, compared to older people, these younger people's social and economic lives are more disrupted by the public health crisis.

Having a job and living with a partner are both "significant protective factors", said the study, which suggested further research into how social support from work and family buffer the psychological impacts of a pandemic.

The survey was conducted toward the end of April, at a time when there

were around 23,000 coronavirus-related deaths in the UK. The study found no significant differences across different UK regions on either general psychiatric disorder or loneliness.

"Future research and public health policies need to move beyond specific psychiatric disorders to attend to the general psychiatric disorders and loneliness of a larger proportion of the population," the study concludes. "They need to pay special attention to vulnerable populations including women, the younger, the unemployed, those not living with a partner, and those who have or had COVID-19 symptoms.

"A pandemic like COVID-19 could exaggerate social disparities in mental health in subtle ways, calling for research on effective interventions such as mindfulness, mediation-based stress reduction and timely provision of psychiatric services."

More information: Lambert Zixin Li et al, Prevalence and predictors of general psychiatric disorders and loneliness during COVID-19 in the United Kingdom, *Psychiatry Research* (2020). DOI: 10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113267

Provided by University of Cambridge