

Q&A: Researcher examines the psychological toll of the pandemic

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From facing fears of contracting the virus, coping with extended separation from loved ones, and combatting the everyday emotional and financial repercussions of COVID-19, the pandemic is having an

unprecedented impact on our mental health and wellbeing.

Dr. Lakshmi Yatham, professor and head of the UBC department of psychiatry, explores the psychological toll of COVID-19 and offers his advice on combating stress and anxiety.

What has been the psychological toll of COVID-19?

We are really just beginning to grasp the psychological toll of COVID-19. While the estimates of the impact vary, data emerging from different parts of the world suggest that between a third to half of the population are reporting significant anxiety symptoms, up to a third are describing depressive symptoms, a quarter are reporting substance use, and up to 20 percent are experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms.

The impact on [mental health](#) appears to be greater in those working on the frontlines and those with pre-existing [mental illnesses](#). Further, COVID-19 affects multiple body systems, including the brain, which means the full direct impact of the virus on mental health is yet to be fully determined.

Whether we're going to experience a global mental health crisis will largely depend on how the pandemic evolves. The longer it continues, the greater toll it's going to take. Without new treatments, without a vaccine, COVID-19 has the potential to have a massive impact on the mental health of people around the world.

What kinds of opportunities does the pandemic provide to re-imagine mental health services?

With COVID-19, we are talking about the potential for everyone's mental health to be affected. And when the entire population is at risk, you have to start thinking about deploying public health strategies that

are effective at the population level.

Moving forward, we need to have mental health be part of an overall public health strategy that involves public health campaigns that promote mental wellbeing and build resilience, address mental health risk factors such as substance use and job losses, and deploy early intervention strategies that leverage advances in digital mental health.

When we emerge from COVID-19, will the anxiety and fear that has permeated society continue? Will we ever shake hands again?

As humans, we are generally very resilient and have remarkable ability to adapt. When we emerge from COVID-19, there will no doubt be some reluctance initially, but with time, we will resume our pre-COVID social behaviors—with some adaptations.

While our social behaviors will return to a new normal, the mental health effects of the pandemic may take much longer to resolve and may progress to mental disorders in many.

One thing that I think will change long-term is the way people connect with their care providers. We're going to see an increase in virtual health care in all areas of medicine and more so in mental health, long after we emerge from COVID-19.

What about long-term psychological effects on children?

Children are incredibly resilient and their brains have much more plasticity than those of adults—meaning they're able to readily change and adapt to different experiences.

Unless this pandemic continues for a much longer period, it's unlikely we're going to see long-term impacts on the social development of our children.

As society adapts to the new normal, what are your top three tips for overcoming anxiety?

1. Continue to take steps to reduce your likelihood of contracting the virus: wear a [face mask](#), wash your hands frequently, don't touch your face, avoid large gatherings and parties, and practice physical distancing.
2. Protect your mental [health](#) and build resilience by maintaining your regular routines, exercising often, and connecting with your social networks, while maintaining physical distance. Social connection is more important than ever before.
3. Reduce your consumption of COVID-19 news. It's important to stay informed, but limit your time to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Distract yourself with things that bring you joy.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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