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How COVID-19 is changing our mental health

Cómo el Covid-19 está cambiando nuestra salud mental

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As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its third year, the world is still gripped by the pandemic and grappling with its consequences. The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health, which has already been well-documented in the literature. This research trend will likely continue to grow stronger, as more and more studies are being published, which confirm the link between the incidence of mental health disorders and the coronavirus pandemic. Many studies highlight the mental health risks that frontline workers face, as well as the increase of mental health disorders in the general population during the pandemic literature (Gordon, 2020; Khan et al., 2020)

Research conducted in the last year in Mexico has shown that higher stress during the pandemic is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms, insomnia and feelings of anxiety, anger, and sadness amongst the general population (Morales Chainé et al., 2021; Rivera Rivera et al., 2021; Terán-Pérez et al., 2021). Rodríguez-Hernández et al. (2021) cross-sectional study of 1667 individuals in Mexico found that the most prevalent pathologies amongst the general population were depression (36.3%) and anxiety (37.7%). Higher levels of psychological stress during the pandemic may stem from increased loneliness, reduced social interactions, tensions amongst families during the lockdown, financial problems, uncertainty about the future and fears of falling ill. Many individuals are also coping with the loss of loved ones because of COVID-19 and the effects of long COVID after falling ill themselves, not to mention costly medical bills.

However, an increase in the incidence of mental health disorders in the general population is not the only concern. Recent studies out of the United States have revealed that people who survive COVID-19 are at increased risk of developing mental health problems, as well as short- and long-term neuropsychiatric symptoms (NPS) a year after their illness (Boldrini et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022). Some patients after recovering from COVID-19 present with anosmia, cognitive and attention deficits (ie, brain fog), new-onset anxiety, depression, psychosis, seizures, and even suicidal behaviour (Boldrini et al., 2021). Xie et al. (2022) study,

which was conducted through the US department of veteran affairs and used a cohort comprising 153 848 people who survived the first 30 days of SARS-CoV-2 infection, and two control groups, found that the risk of developing mental health disorders was consistently higher in the COVID-19 group. The mental health disorders documented in the study include anxiety, depression, stress and adjustment disorders, opioid and other substance use disorders, cognitive decline, and sleep disorders (Xie et al., 2022). One of the researchers in the Xie et al. (2022) study argues that in light of these results we need to reframe our understanding of COVID-19 because as he argues “It is not only a respiratory virus; it is a systemic virus that may provoke damage and clinical consequences in nearly every organ system—including mental health disorders and neurocognitive decline” (Al-Aly, 2022, p. 1).

By reframing our understanding of COVID-19, we can start to understand it as a systemic virus which may cause mental health disorders and neurocognitive decline. Considering recent research, the COVID-19 pandemic should be viewed as a major traumatic event that has had psychological repercussions on the general population. This suggests that tackling mental health disorders amongst COVID-19 survivors, as well as the general population should be a priority on the public health agenda. Unfortunately, the mental health infrastructure in Mexico, which has long been the object of international criticism, is not equipped to deal with this challenge (Reyes-Foster & Duncan, 2020). Mexico’s public mental healthcare infrastructure is underfunded and understaffed, forcing many to pay for psychiatric care in the private sector, which is unaffordable for most (Reyes-Foster & Duncan, 2020). Mexico needs to improve its public mental health infrastructure if it wants to address the increased incidence of mental health disorders amongst the general population and COVID-19 survivors. If it does not, then this unacknowledged mental health crisis will be left to grow.

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