



## COVID-19: PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** *The world is thrown into chaos because of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) from Wuhan, China, and now life for the people around the globe has gone into a standstill. This has brought unprecedented efforts to institute the practice of physical distancing (or “social distancing”) and shutdowns of usual day-to-day functioning. Research has shown that people are not only affected physically but mentally and psychologically as well, resulting in resulting in national behavioural patterns, such as spikes in mental health-related problems. This article aims to describe the psychological impact of COVID-19 onto the lives of people around the world. The pandemic has a “profound and pervasive impact” on global mental health as billions of people struggle to cope with isolated living and anxiety spikes, as showed by imposed mass quarantine applied by nationwide lockdown programs which had produced mass hysteria, anxiety and distress amongst other things. Due to the psychology of uncertainty, it causes tremendous anxiety on an individual, especially by uncertainty in the future. However certain values upheld by people can help mitigate the mindset of uncertainty, shifting one’s uncertainty to a more positive and productive outlook. In conclusion, the best psychological response to the pandemic would be to build up one’s psychological resiliency, and do our part by spreading awareness and positivity, by spreading hope, being empathetic and understanding those who are struggling due to the effects of COVID-19, as well as those who are suffering because of the disease.*

**KEYWORD:** Social Distancing, Uncertainty, Mental Health, Covid-19, Pandemic

### INTRODUCTION

With the world thrown into chaos upon the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) from Wuhan, China, life for the citizens of countries affected by this pandemic seemed to have gone into a standstill. An attack by a family of viruses that had evolved from a previous type known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) leaves us in a state of calamity due to the lack of preparedness of all the countries by the magnitude of the effect of the virus, making us not all prepared and caught off guard. This has brought unprecedented efforts to institute the practice of physical distancing (called “social distancing” in most cases) in countries all over the world, resulting in national behavioural patterns, such as spikes in mental health-related problems, and shutdowns of usual day-to-day functioning like socialising with members of society.

While the world waits for a vaccine that can help mitigate the effect of the disease, an unthinkable move had been made just months ago, where quarantine and social distancing have now become commonplace globally as governments make concerted efforts to fight the continuous and dramatic increase of coronavirus. The change in behavioural patterns due to physical distancing can be great, which resulted to vast mental health concerns ranging from anxiety, and anger to sleep disturbances, depression and even posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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It is normal to experience fear and anxiety about a new disease and the uncertainty of what could possibly happen can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in both adults and children. Children are just as likely to experience it, as an adult would, such as a fear of dying, a fear of their relatives dying, or a fear of what it means to receive medical treatment. They may no longer have the sense of structure and stimulation that is provided by that environment, and now they have less opportunity to be with their friends and get that social support that is essential for good mental well-being. Public health actions, such as social distancing, can make them feel isolated and lonely and can increase their levels of stress and anxiety.

The coronavirus disease is still not well enough known to be able to anticipate its behaviour and this challenges all affected countries across the globe in more ways than they can imagine. Nevertheless, scientists are working hard to provide us with a solution as there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. In the meantime, we can only wait and hope for more positive outcomes.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Mental Health**

COVID-19 had required many countries across the globe to implement early quarantine measures as the fundamental disease control tool. Apart from physical sufferings, the consequences of this quarantine on the mental health and well-being at personal and population-levels are grand in number. Imposed mass quarantine applied by nationwide lockdown programs had produced mass hysteria, anxiety and distress amongst other things, due to factors like sense of getting cornered and loss of control. This can be intensified if families need separation, by uncertainty of disease progression, insufficient supply of basic essentials, financial losses, increased perception of risk, which usually get magnified by vague information and improper communications through media in the early phase of a pandemic. Previous outbreaks have reported that psychological impact of quarantine can vary from immediate effects, like irritability, fear of contracting and spreading infection to family members, anger, confusion, frustration, loneliness, denial, anxiety, depression, insomnia, despair, to extremes of consequences, including suicide (Dubey, 2020).

France-Press (2020) noted that there is a likelihood that the pandemic will have a “profound and pervasive impact” on global mental health as billions of people struggle to cope with isolated living and anxiety spikes.

A survey conducted showed how often a respondent felt sad or nervous in the last month. After comparing the responses with a sample of 19,330 demographically similar people in a 2018 government-sponsored survey of U.S. adults that asked the same questions, the staggering results showed that the 2020 participants were eight times as likely to screen positive for serious mental illness – 28%, compared to 3.4% in the 2018 survey. The vast majority of the 2020 participants, 70%, met criteria for moderate to serious mental illness, compared with 22% in 2018. Clearly, the pandemic has had a devastating effect on mental health. It showed that younger adults ages 18 to 44 have borne the brunt of the mental health effects. They’ve experienced a tenfold increase in serious mental distress compared with 2018. Meanwhile, adults 60 and older had the smallest increases in serious mental health issues. A likely cause showed that it could be because the younger adults were more likely to lose their jobs as restaurants and stores closed and were more likely to be in a precarious



financial position to begin with. The youngest adults were also already struggling with mental health issues, which were exacerbated by the pandemic (Twenge, 2020).

For those who have already been experiencing mental health problems before the outbreak, such as depression, bipolar or other mental disorders, the quarantine can aggravate an already tough situation, concurs Dr. Ronald del Castillo, a psychologist from the University of the Philippines. Add these with other circumstances, many of which are entrenched for us in the Philippines, such as poverty, unemployment or underemployment, isolation, poor transportation, limited health care access, or disingenuous politicians, then the psychological impact of the quarantine is all the more difficult, especially when the flow of everyday lives has been disrupted by something as serious as a pandemic (Co, 2020).

Furthermore, Frank McAndrew, an Evolutionary Psychologist at Knox College in Illinois had shared that being quarantined gives one a sense of being at the mercy of other people and other uncontrollable forces such as an epidemic. This brings a feeling of helplessness and uncertainty about the future that can be very unsettling. It becomes much more difficult for humans find isolation so difficult to withstand. Why is that so? One of the reasons says that is it because humans as social creature by nature. Therefore, loneliness can be damaging to one's mental and physical health. Socially isolated people are less able to deal with stressful situations. And though millions of people are coming to terms with being increasingly cut off from society, beyond the inconvenience of working from home, or not being able to go to bars, restaurants or cinemas, however, experts have found that social isolation can have a profound effect on people's physical, as well as mental health. Experts suggest that the negative feelings and experiences associated with prolonged isolation will come for us all (Molina, 2020).

With the possibility of increase in mental health problems, it is only natural for nation to increase its priority in mental health funding just as published in *Lancet Psychiatry*, where a panel of 24 specialists had called for more funding for research into the impacts COVID-19 may have on society's mental well-being. Two accompanying surveys of the British public showed that most people questioned had experienced heightened anxiety and fear of becoming mentally unwell since the pandemic struck.

Another possible cause for the spike in mental health issues could be the lack or struggle to obtain services and preventions during the pandemic. Among young people who reported needing mental health services, 34% have experienced delays or disruption in access to mental health medications due to COVID-19 and 47% have experienced delays or disruption in accessing psychosocial support as a result of the ongoing pandemic. It is also important to highlight that these survey findings suggest 9% of respondents requiring mental health medications have never had access to them and similarly, 14% of respondents needing psychosocial support lack access to this essential service in a non-pandemic context, a study in Asia and the Pacific showed (Apcaso, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The core question now is: why does people's mental health suffer during this pandemic? Robinson (2020) believes that it is due to the psychology of uncertainty. Like most people, uncertainty can cause tremendous anxiety on an individual, which is due to one's survival



brain, which is constantly updating one's world, making judgements about what's safe and what isn't. Its disdain for uncertainty causes it to make up a variety of untested stories hundreds of times a day, therefore uncertainty equals to danger.

Meanwhile, as many institutions undergo countless of clinical trials to create a vaccine, we slowly try to return to our normal lifestyle, some calling it the "new normal". There is no such thing as a "new normal", for we still do not know what lies ahead and what will happen in the future. There is still uncertainty in the future. These uncertainty stems from the fear of what may or may not happen in the coming days, from the fear of the lack of movement by the government, by the political strife that is mixed in during the pandemic. And these fear and uncertainty begets anxiety, which may likely lead to depression or other higher mental and/or psychological disorders.

The psychology of uncertainty (or the uncertainty mindset) becomes a palpable psychological impact. However, despite uncertainty, the mindset can be anticipated just as how one can be calmer anticipating pain than anticipating uncertainty because pain is certain, as found by certain studies. Certain values upheld by people help mitigate the mindset of uncertainty, shifting one's uncertainty to a more positive and productive outlook. Such is the case for Filipinos, who are known for their resiliency.

Filipinos, just like many other countries, continue to face the COVID-19 pandemic head on. According to Dela Cruz (2020), one of the core qualities of Filipino resiliency is hope. Hope is the essence that gives strength to men in dire straits. Faith in God and love of family strengthen these men's resolve to rise above their experience and try their best to become useful again. In other words, despite the dire crisis that we are facing, hope is what pushes the Filipinos to become resilient during this pandemic. Other major factors in the resiliency of Filipinos are Family, Faith and Fun. Perhaps this is why the Filipinos are so resilient and are able to see things in a positive light despite the many tragedies that befall their land (Manuncia, 2019).

In conclusion, the best psychological response to the pandemic would be to build up one's psychological resiliency, which is defined as the ability to sustain or recuperate psychological well-being during or after facing the stressful conditions. This can be achieved by ending the vulnerability to psychopathology and mental dysfunction when exposed to the viral infection or at-least living in the regions under threat. The health care regulatory authorities should communicate to the people that the risk of being infected may sustain for a long time, but the government will protect the nation. In addition, it should further be communicated that serious measurements will be implemented at hospitals and communities. Moreover, people should be given a hope that everything will become normal and controlled with the passage of time (Khan et al, 2020).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

In these times of stress and uncertainty, there is not much we can do but follow instructions from the government and health institutions as we await patiently for vaccines to be made. However, we can do our part by spreading awareness and positivity, by spreading hope, being empathetic and understanding those who are struggling due to the effects of COVID-19, as well as those who are suffering because of the disease.



It is recommended by the World Health Organization (2020) to stay connected and maintain your social networks and try as much as possible to keep your personal daily routines or create new routines, if circumstances change. During times of stress, pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in healthy activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly, keep regular sleep routines and eat healthy food, as much as possible. Seek information updates and practical guidance at specific times during the day from health professionals and WHO website and avoid listening to or following rumours that make you feel uncomfortable, for a near-constant stream of news reports about the outbreak can cause anyone to feel anxious or distressed.

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