

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS AND THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The pandemic has negatively impacted adolescents and interventions are needed.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a catastrophic event for adults, youth, and children worldwide. As of March 4, 2021, it has caused more than 2,563,000 global deaths, including the loss of more than 518,000 U.S. citizens. The trauma of grief, disruptions of daily lifestyles and routines, isolation from friends and loved ones, and uncertainties about the future have taken an enormous toll on the mental health of adolescents. Since caregiving youth also have the stress of caring for ill or disabled loved ones at home in addition to their concerns about the pandemic, they should receive immediate mental health support.

Narrative

In the past year, numerous studies have been conducted to assess the mental health impacts of the novel coronavirus disease outbreak (Covid-19) that was first declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. Early in the pandemic, on May 13, 2020, the United Nations published a Policy Brief, *Covid-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health*, determining from their meta-analysis of mental health research from the first months of 2020 that, “The mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently” (pg. 2). Regarding the impacts on youth they stated, “Emotional difficulties among children and adolescents are exacerbated by family stress, social isolation, with some facing increased abuse, disrupted education and uncertainty about their futures, occurring at critical points in their emotional development” (pg. 2). Thus, all youth, including caregiving youth, have been presented with unprecedented challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The early toll of the Covid-19 outbreak on adolescents is apparent in Morgan Stanley’s Alliance for Children’s Health study that was published in January 2021, *Assessing the Mental Health Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Their Coronavirus Health and Impact Survey (CRISIS) included the following: “a sample of 5,646 participants, roughly half from the U.S. and half from the U.K. Data were collected online April 7-17, 2020. . . . Half of each country’s sample completed adult self-reports and half completed parent reports on their children ages 5 to 17” (pg. 2). This assessment revealed that, “Children with high stress related to financial and food insecurity, as well as higher family and social isolation stress, experienced the most negative mental health during the pandemic” (pg. 5). In consideration of these findings, the implications for caregiving youth could be extrapolated from this result, since many young caregivers often face these stated pressures, “financial and food insecurity, as well as higher family and social isolation stress.” Thus, with the added Covid-19 challenges from the past year, young caregivers may be experiencing greater negative mental health effects than their peers.

Other research that underscores the negative mental health impacts for youth during the pandemic is listed on the website of Covid-Minds-Network, an organization that has been tracking longitudinal mental health studies worldwide throughout the pandemic. Covid-Minds-Network reported in their online February 2021 update, *The Psychological Impact of Covid-19*, that, “The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected young people. . . . Data from twelve studies has shown a longitudinal increase in depression among adolescents in the United States, Peru, and the Netherlands. Multiracial adolescents and those who experienced lockdown had worse changes in their mental health.”

Accordingly, multiple surveys of youth in the United States reveal this same trend towards negative mental health outcomes due to Covid-19. For example, in the October 2020 issue of *Pediatrics*, the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, an article, *Well-being of Parents and Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey*, reported that their June 2020 national survey of parents with children under age 18 showed that “since March 2020, 27% of parents reported worsening mental health for themselves, and 14% reported worsening behavioral health for their children.” Additionally, in an online article in October 2020, the American Psychological Association shared that their *Stress in America* survey, conducted by the Harris Poll in 2020, revealed that for Gen Z teens, ages 13-17, “more than 2 in 5 Gen Z teens (43%) say the level of stress in their life has increased over the past year.” Furthermore, a non-profit, Challenge Success, that is affiliated with Stanford’s Graduate School of Education and with NBC News, in a study called *Kids Under Pressure* surveyed over 10,000 American high school students in the Fall of 2020 and found that “32% of students reported mental health as a major source of stress versus 26% pre-pandemic.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recorded a substantial increase in the rates of mental health-related emergency department (ED) hospital visits for children and youth in the United States for six months in 2020. In their November 2020 report they stated, “Beginning in April 2020, the proportion of children’s mental health–related ED visits among all pediatric ED visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019, the proportion of mental health–related visits for children aged 5–11 and 12–17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%, respectively.” It is not known how many of these ED visits were for caregiving youth.

Thus, in the United States and around the world, numerous studies from the past year have shown that the coronavirus outbreak has been detrimental to the mental health of adolescents. Accordingly, it can be conjectured that these negative mental health impacts upon young people as whole are also affecting the nation’s more than one million caregiving youth, who are not only enduring the pandemic but are also helping to care for sick or disabled household members.

In response to the devastating Covid-19 crisis, multiple organizations and agencies have conducted studies in the past year to address the mental health needs of youth in America and around the world. These groups are diligently working to promote mental health for adolescents and for the population as a whole. Many of them have provided helpful online resources to assist healthcare providers, educators, governments, and individuals in encouraging mental health: the American Psychological Association (apa.org), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov), the National Alliance on Mental Illness (nami.org), the American Academy of Pediatrics (aap.org), Mental Health America (mhanational.org), the World Health Organization (who.int), and UNICEF (unicef.org). The World Health Organization has also developed comprehensive guidelines for implementing mental health programs for adolescents based on a meta-analysis of current research and evidence-based recommendations. Strategic mental health initiatives, interventions, and resources are critically needed at this unprecedented time—and they will be even more impactful if they will embrace young caregivers as a unique category of adolescents in crisis to support.

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