



COLLATERAL DAMAGE:

The Mental Health Effects of the Pandemic

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About the Author

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Isolated and Lonely

When the pandemic surged in the United States in early 2020, Lindsey Hornickel, a twenty-five-year-old living in Louisville, Kentucky, believed she could manage. Although she had struggled with depression in the past, Hornickel's mental health seemed to be good. With some of the extra time she had on her hands, she took on more work from home. She reassured herself that everything would be fine and refused to dwell on any potential worries.

Months into the pandemic and its social isolation, Hornickel's mental health suddenly plummeted. "I went through a depressive swing. It was unbearable,"⁵ she says. Eventually, it got so bad that Hornickel confessed to her roommate she was having suicidal thoughts. She entered a treatment program to deal with her depression, bipolar disorder, and suicidal thoughts. Although Hornickel improved with treatment, she worried about sliding back into depression and suicidal thoughts as the pandemic continued to drag on. "For me, personally, the nighttime is really hard," Hornickel says. "And when there's not sunlight and sunshine and things to do—at that time in the winter—it definitely compounds those feelings."⁶

Hornickel was not alone in feeling isolated, lonely, and depressed. Research shows that difficulties with mental health have been increasing since the beginning of the pandemic. Mental health experts believe that measures taken to protect public health and reduce the spread of the coro-

navirus, such as lockdowns and social distancing, have had a devastating impact on mental health.

Mental Health Struggles on the Rise

Lockdowns, masks, and social distancing were aimed at slowing the virus's spread. When people adhered to these measures, infections slowed, but feelings of isolation and loneliness grew. People found their regular social routines disrupted. In many cases they no longer went to school or work. They could not meet friends for dinner at restaurants or work out at their gyms. Youth, high school, and college sports canceled entire seasons. Without their normal social routines, people could only interact with a small, limited group of people. While many people attempted to connect with family and friends virtually, the physical separation and isolation made it more difficult to make meaningful social connections. As a result, many people felt increasingly lonely and isolated. "We are social creatures—designed to eye gaze, handhold, laugh—and our bodies and brains are rewarded when we do this," says Dara Schwartz, a clinical psychologist. "When we don't or feel we can't, we do not feel like ourselves."⁷

Before the pandemic began, British artist Capella regularly spent hours alone during the week to paint and work on her art. On the weekends, Capella socialized, mingling and talking with friends and strangers in local restaurants and stores. The pandemic ended that routine. Capella found herself isolated without her usual social routine. "It's been really difficult . . . because such a big part of my life was just talking to strangers and meeting new people, but now it feels like that has all been put on hold," she says. "I've been alone before, but this loneliness is new."⁸

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—Capella, a British artist

Loneliness Affects Mental Health

Social isolation and loneliness affect everyone in different ways. Some people can adjust to these changes, while others have a hard time doing that. For the latter group, loneliness can increase anxiety and depression. For Mary Kathryn Kimray of Raleigh, North Carolina, the isolation and social distancing required during the pandemic left her feeling stressed and overwhelmed. As her anxiety worsened, Kimray talked to her doctor, who suggested she seek help from a therapist. Through several virtual appointments, Kimray learned how to calm her anxiety.

Research shows that the isolation and loneliness of the pandemic have had a significant effect on mental health. When Boston University researchers compared the results of a study done in 2017–2018 with their own new study, conducted in 2020, they found a threefold increase in depression among American adults.

Individuals who are forced to quarantine in order to slow the spread of coronavirus often have to isolate from family and friends.



Fighting Loneliness in Older Adults

The risk of experiencing severe illness from COVID-19 increases with age. As a result, older adults have been advised to socially isolate as much as possible during the pandemic. As months of little social interaction stretched through 2020 into 2021, social distancing and self-quarantining limited older adults' exposure to infection but did so at the cost of increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. Even before the pandemic, research showed that an estimated 25 percent of adults over age sixty-five were socially isolated. Under pandemic restrictions, that number has likely increased a great deal, causing concern among health experts. Aside from increases in anxiety, depression, and suicide, loneliness and isolation can lead to heightened risk of dementia, heart disease, stroke, and premature death.

The researchers said they expected to find an increase in depression, but they were surprised by how much it had changed. "We knew that poor mental health increased after large-scale events, based on previous research," says the study's lead researcher, Catherine Ettman of Boston University. "We were surprised at the high levels of depression; these rates were higher than what we have seen in the general population after other large-scale traumas like September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, and the Hong Kong unrest."⁹

Not only is depression more widespread, it has also become more intense for many people. The Boston University study found higher levels of depression symptoms across all demographic groups. "There were fewer people who had no depressive symptoms, and there were more people who had mild, moderate, moderately severe and severe depression symptoms,"¹⁰ says Ettman.

Mental health professionals are seeing an increase in patients seeking help with depression and other mental health problems. The Disaster Distress Helpline, which offers counseling and emotional support, reported a staggering 335 percent increase in calls from March through July 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. "Helpline counselors have reported callers expressing feelings of isolation and interpersonal concerns related to physical

Cut off from their usual sources of social support, large numbers of people are seeking help with depression and other mental health challenges. Many doctors and mental health professionals are offering online appointments to help stop the spread of the virus.



distancing such as being cut off from social supports,”¹¹ says Hannah Collins, a spokeswoman for Vibrant Emotional Health, which runs the helpline.

In Chicago, Cityscape Counseling has hired two new therapists since the pandemic began to handle the increased demand for counseling services. “We see a lot of single young professionals. I think it’s been especially tough on them. The isolation, lack of connection, often enhances depression,”¹² says executive director Chelsea Hudson.

Before the pandemic, twenty-seven-year-old Olivia worked a flexible job that allowed her to travel the world. After the pandemic arrived, Olivia found herself stuck in her New York City apartment alone with little to do. Feeling trapped and lonely, she began to experience depression symptoms. “I just started to cry over everything. I was extra sensitive to the dumbest things—very,

very small things that normally, I don't think I'd have the time to be bothered by,"¹³ she says. Olivia became lethargic and slept much more than usual. When she was not sleeping or crying, she often felt miserable and angry. When Olivia described her symptoms to a social worker, she was told that she was probably experiencing depression.

Panic and Anxiety

For some, feelings of stress, isolation, and loneliness have triggered bouts of anxiety. Melissa Cella, a wife and mother of two, had received therapy for panic attacks in the past. The pandemic's day-to-day isolation from extended family and friends led to increased anxiety and a return of her panic attacks. "If you go through a full blown anxiety attack, the next day you feel like you got the coronavirus—your throat hurts from hyperventilating and doing a weird breathing situation," she says. "It's different for everybody. I had a sore throat and my body was aching and my chest was tight."¹⁴

As the pandemic wore on, more people were reporting anxiety and panic attacks similar to what Cella was experiencing. "We have seen both an increase in people calling in for panic attacks and even calling for other things like anxiety . . . related to quarantine, social distancing, not having control of their lives,"¹⁵ says Amanda Patterson, a mental health specialist.

Difficult-to-Manage Mental Illness

People who struggled with mental illness before the pandemic have been doubly challenged during this period. Naomi, a twenty-one-year-old psychology student, struggled with anxiety before the pandemic but was usually able to manage her condition by doing volunteer work and regularly getting out of the house. These coping techniques have not been available to her during the pandemic, leaving her feeling socially isolated and anxious. She has turned to journal writing in an effort to calm her thoughts.

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GETTING HELP AND INFORMATION

American Psychiatric Association

www.psychiatry.org

The American Psychiatric Association is an organization of member physicians working together to ensure human care and effective treatment for all persons with mental disorders. Its website includes a COVID-19 information hub with a special section on mental health resources for families.

American Psychological Association

www.apa.org

The American Psychological Association represents American psychologists, who study and treat human behavior. The association's website features a special page of COVID-19 resources for psychologists, health care workers, and the general public at www.apa.org/topics/covid-19.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov

The CDC is the premier public health agency in the United States. Its website includes the latest information about the coronavirus and COVID-19. The website also has a useful section about coping with stress during the pandemic. Links to articles and where to get help can be found at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html.

Mental Health America

www.mhanational.org

Mental Health America is an advocacy group for people with mental illnesses and their families. Its website features many resources, including an interactive tool to assist in finding mental health help, information on support groups, and mental health screening tools.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

www.nami.org

NAMI is an advocacy group for people with mental illnesses and has local chapters across the country. Its website offers a variety

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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