



The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

"There is no health without mental health." -Dr David Satcher

1. Introduction

The sudden advent of COVID-19 on our shores and the realization that it was a highly infectious and potentially life-threatening virus led to the declaration of a state of disaster. The regulations thereof resulted in the imposition of the harsh Level 5 Lockdown in March last year, which required that everybody be confined to their place of residence with the exception of those rendering essential services; this was one of the harshest lockdowns in the world. It would not be long before the toll of the disease itself, as well as the psycho-social and the socio-economic consequences of the lockdown would be felt.

The impact on the mental health of many became a shadow pandemic. A Vatican document stressed that

"the psychological suffering caused or worsened by the deep concerns over this unknown disease has been hardly considered. Most especially, the loss of control over our personal existence and the life that we share with our loved ones has been a source of major concern. When medical expertise and treatments have suddenly proven unsuitable, ineffectual or unsuccessful, the fear of the unknown has prompted the following questions: What will become of me? What will become of us?"²

2. What is Mental Health?

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence and throughout adulthood until old age.³ Mental health is an integral part of human life, and as such it should be prioritized.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."⁴ The WHO stresses that mental health is "more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities." Peak mental health is about not only avoiding active conditions but also looking after ongoing wellness and happiness.⁵

Furthermore, mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as human beings to think, feel, engage with one another, earn a living and find some enjoyment in life. "On this basis, the promotion, protection and restoration of mental health can be regarded as a vital concern of individuals, communities and societies throughout the world."⁶

It is important to note that good mental health depends on a delicate balance of factors and that

several aspects of one's own life and the world at large can work together to undermine mental well-being.

South Africa is among the most unequal societies in the world, and many South Africans were already experiencing a high degree of stress, especially financial stress, prior to the advent of COVID-19. The incidence of unemployment was high and many were unable to find the opportunity to work productively. Some economic activity was happening in the informal sector, but many households were dependent on social grants for an income. Gender-based violence and violent crime were endemic and corruption rampant. Many communities struggled with an overwhelming number of mental health disorders with few economic and medical resources to alleviate them.⁷ All this was exacerbated as frightened South Africans withdrew to the isolation of their homes with their mental health already compromised. It was the beginning of a period of great uncertainty and social dislocation.

3. What Happened Next

Everybody entered the lockdown with a measure of trepidation. There was so little knowledge about the virus or the likely incidence of mortality amongst those infected with it. Difficult conversations about illness and death took place in every home; parents and caregivers had to explain to their children why they could not go to school or go outside. It soon became apparent that the lockdown had resulted in an escalation in gender-based violence; a marked decline in people's sense of well-being; and in a socio-economic catastrophe. Many South Africans were impacted by all three.

The experience of confinement, the disruption of social activities and relationships and, above all, the anguish in the face of an unknown disease, coupled with the death of family and friends, have heightened the mental fragility of people, especially those alone or suffering from pre-existing mental health challenges. Key to understanding and addressing the determinants of poor mental health that are being affected by COVID-19 are such factors as financial difficulties; debt; unemployment; bereavement; domestic violence and abuse; risky alcohol consumption; and substance misuse.⁸ Many employees lost their jobs as businesses were forced to close. Pensions were accessed prematurely; many were unable to make

payments on cars or homes, and the informal sector was virtually annihilated.

It soon became apparent that a major factor in the socio-economic catastrophe was the spectre of corruption and the redirection of resources allocated to combat the virus to benefit private individuals, many of whom were associated with the Department of Health! Such cynical abuse of funds meant for the common good in an unprecedented time of need beggars belief. It did much to undermine public trust and to compromise social solidarity.

4. The Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Adolescents

Children and adolescents have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the various lockdowns. Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres and schools were closed for long periods and, in the case of the latter, many remain closed due to lack of funding. The immediate impact of these closures was that children did not benefit from the school feeding scheme, resulting in real hunger. Teaching at school and tertiary levels was disrupted and the full academic programme for all at the same time has not yet resumed. Parents were tasked with the responsibility of supervising the school work of their children at home. This had vastly different outcomes depending on the access of the household to the necessary technology, money for the purchase of data,⁹ and the parent or caregiver's level of education. This was yet another sign of the degree of inequality in our country. The foundation phase was particularly hard hit and experts predict that this this will have long-term educational consequences; making up for lost time will be difficult.

Both children and adolescents have had little real-time contact with their peers through much of the lockdown. They know that we are living through an unprecedented period and that parents and caregivers are unable to give them assurances that they will be untouched by the pandemic. The world around them is dominated by COVID-19 discourse and they are aware that, as the disease comes closer, family members and friends may get sick and die.

Not surprisingly, there have been rising levels of anxiety and depression in children and teenagers.¹⁰ British actor and comedian, Stephen Fry, who is also president of Mind, a mental health

charity, has called for a network of mental health walk-in centres for children and young people who, he says, have been hit worst by the pandemic. The charity has appealed for hubs through which children can access support without a referral from a doctor or their school. The walk-in centres would provide help for people aged 11 to 25. Fry added that although he has seen a reduction in the stigma about mental health, the pandemic has taken a “huge toll” on people’s mental wellbeing, and Mind’s research has shown that young people are “among the hardest hit”. In February 2021 there were 305 802 young people in contact with mental health services in England, compared with 237 088 children in March 2020.¹¹

While the mental well-being crisis among students did not start during the pandemic, it has certainly been compounded by it. For more than a decade, rates of mental illness among young people have been increasing. Suggested reasons for this include cultural trends brought on by increased connectivity, smartphone and internet dependency, and social media addiction.¹² Studies indicate that increases among children in time spent in front of screens has seen a rise in ADHD symptoms.¹³

5. Orphanhood

There is yet another shadow pandemic – that of orphanhood. An estimated 1.5 million children worldwide have been orphaned because of COVID.¹⁴ A recent study conducted by the Universities of Oxford and Cape Town found that South Africa recorded one of the highest numbers of primary caregiver deaths in the world. Between March 2020 and April this year, the study showed that 82 422 children were orphaned and another 94 625 lost their primary caregivers.¹⁵ While there are no disaggregated statistics, it is possible that some of these children may have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS and their older grandparents or caregivers to COVID-19. Rosie Mashale, who runs the Baphumelele Children’s Home in Khayelitsha, said that they have had to start a new programme to assist children in child-only households whom they cannot accommodate at the facility.¹⁶ Once again we are seeing the emergence of child-headed households, which were a feature of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In terms of the Children’s Act of 2005, children living in child-headed households are regarded as children in ‘especially difficult circumstances’ and as such in ‘need of care and protection’.¹⁷ There is an urgent need to assist these children and to address their many

vulnerabilities. They are experiencing tragic loss and are in great need of psycho-social support as well as material assistance.

6. 2020

2020 was a year when South African’s staggered from one lockdown to the other. Uncertainty was the one certainty. Everybody’s psychological health took a hit and there was a general sense of fatigue. Isolation and loneliness were the common experience and many died alone. For those left behind expressions of grief were constrained as the number of people allowed to attend funerals was limited. Emergency help lines were inundated with calls from desperate women and children confined at home in abusive circumstances. Economic hardship was the common lived experience of half the population of South Africa.

Multiple social, psychological, and biological factors determine the level of mental health of a person at any point of time. Violence and persistent socio-economic pressures are recognized risks to mental health, the clearest evidence being associated with gender-based violence.¹⁸

Christmas 2020 was bleak. Access to church services was limited, and there was not much money to spend on celebrations and gifts. Yet, with the hope that springs eternal, there was great belief that the New Year could only be better. However, it soon became apparent that this would not be the case; 2021 would bring more death and sadness.

7. 2021 and the Vaccine

While this year would see the devastation of the second and third waves of COVID-19 and renewed lockdowns, it also saw the gradual opening up of the economy and the hope of a vaccine. The road to the vaccine has been fraught with difficulty, but we have reached a stage where it is available to all persons over the age of eighteen. This is a remarkable achievement in that it makes COVID-19 a manageable illness. It also means that all our health resources will not need to be targeted against the virus. As the new Health Minister, Dr Joe Phaahla, said in an interview “come the beginning of 2022 the equilibrium will be much better, so that whatever ground we might have lost in terms of our non-communicable diseases, our infectious diseases like TB, HIV/AIDS,

hepatitis, sexually transmitted illnesses, all those including cancers and so on, we could then start to recover.”¹⁹

The challenges created by the pandemic mean that we must do all we can to ensure that it does not drive increased health inequalities. We must take action to prevent and mitigate the impact being disproportionately felt by those with particular needs or vulnerabilities, such as people with existing mental health issues, many of whom are homeless and who endure other forms of social exclusion.²⁰ Poor mental health is also associated with gender-based violence, stressful work conditions, inequality, unhealthy living conditions, physical ill-health, gang violence and human rights violations. All these factors are far too prevalent in our society.²¹

8. Conclusion

If the COVID-19 journey has taught us anything it is that “an environment that respects and protects basic civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights is fundamental to mental health. Without the security and freedom provided by these rights, it is difficult to maintain a high level of mental health. The complex situation of the pandemic clearly shows that we are beings with a fragile body and a very sensitive ‘mind’”.²² Much of the pandemic is fuelled by human behaviour and all our individual actions can either undermine or promote the common good. The singular lesson of COVID-19 is that, in the words of St Francis, “it is in giving that we receive”: social distancing; the wearing of masks; sanitising and vaccinating are reciprocal actions that contribute to the well-being of all. We need to build a more caring society and to be kind to each other.

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² <https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2021/05/vatican-tackles-psychological-fallout-from-covid-pandemic/>

³ <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

⁵ <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/154543#definition>

⁶ <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>

⁷ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-09-03-south-africa-is-in-a-mental-health-crisis-and-we-all-need->

⁸ <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/05/21/no-health-without-mental-health-why-this-matters-now-more-than-ever/>

⁹ There is increasing discussion that access to data should be included as a basic human right.

¹⁰ <https://www.sasop.co.za/news>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/aug/31/stephen-fry-in-plea-for-walk-in-mental-health-hubs-for-youths-hit-by-pandemic>

¹² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-08-03-data-costs-and-online-access-high-on-list-of-obstacles-to-online-learning-for-south-african-students/>

¹³ <https://www.sasop.co.za/news> ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

¹⁴ <https://www.ukri.org/news/study-reveals-scale-of-children-orphaned-by-covid-19/>

¹⁵ <https://www.iol.co.za/weekend-argus/news/covid-19-orphans-the-hidden-pandemic-cef99808-9aa5-4720-bdda-df08e08fbc94>

¹⁶ <https://www.iol.co.za/weekend-argus/news/covid-19-orphans-the-hidden-pandemic-cef99808-9aa5-4720-bdda-df08e08fbc94>

¹⁷ Children’s Act No 38 of 2005

¹⁸ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

¹⁹ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-08-30-we-are-in-uncharted-waters-but-we-will-get-out-of-it-working->

²⁰ <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/05/21/no-health-without-mental-health-why-this-matters-now-more-than-ever/>

²¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

²² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

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