

Impact of COVID-19 on Young People's Mental Health

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There is increasing evidence of the psychological impact of COVID-19 on various population groups, with concern particularly focused on young people's mental health. Yet to date little research has explored the views of young people themselves on the impact of living through the pandemic on their mental health. Young people's discussions on social media have highlighted the complexities of this impact and how socially embedded it has been. Forging appropriate support for young people post-pandemic will necessitate looking beyond an individualised conceptualisation of their mental health that sets this apart from broader societal concerns. Instead, both research and practice need to take a systemic approach, recognising young people's societal belonging and social contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19 ; young people ; mental health ; social media

1. Introduction

Whilst the psychological impact of the pandemic has been seen across society, COVID-19 has been argued to have particularly affected young people's mental health ^{[1][2]}. Research has suggested that young people have suffered mental distress ^{[1][3]}, depressive symptoms ^{[4][5]}, anxiety ^[6] and suicidal thoughts ^[7]. It is predicted that "1.5 million children and young people will require mental health support as a direct impact of the pandemic during the next three to five years" ^[8]. Creating appropriate mental health support has, therefore, already been argued to be an integral part of addressing both the short- and long-term consequences of the pandemic ^[9].

In young people this mental health impact has been attributed to various causes, notably disrupted schooling, online teaching, and social isolation ^{[10][11]}. Yet, there is also emerging evidence globally that some young people's mental health has improved during the pandemic. In an England-based study, 35% of year 13s reported feeling happier ^[12]. A study in New Zealand found that 17.5% of participants (aged 18–75+ years) with pre-existing mental health conditions reported improvements to their mental health during the pandemic ^[13].

Listening to Young People's Voices: The Value of Social Media

COVID-19 precipitated a widespread move to increased time online, whether for work or socialising. In the UK 97% of children aged 5–15 went online in 2020, an increase on 2019 ^[14]. It is known that social media can offer a space for people to turn in moments of distress and seek support for mental health issues ^{[15][16]}. This has been documented amongst young people ^[17] and also during COVID-19, such as in relation to suicidality ^[18]. Social media discussions therefore afford crucial insights into the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health.

2. The Virus: Loss, Fear and Other People

In relation to the virus itself, young people primarily spoke of fear and being "anxious".

However, anxiety for their own health was less pronounced than that evidenced by young people's discussions of seeing or hearing about how unwell others were. Many wrote about loved ones who had underlying health conditions for example, or who had already caught COVID-19, and they spoke of their fear of relatives becoming severely ill or "getting worse".

3. Isolation and Life Inside the Home

Lockdowns meant that the lives of UK young people moved into the home, causing physical isolation from friends. Conversations on social media throughout 2020 and into 2021 demonstrated the impact of this through frequent statements, such as "I miss my friends". Young people described struggling to adapt to virtual socialising, a lack of face-to-

face interaction and also the loss of friendships, with some writing that the loneliness they were experiencing was causing them to feel “depressed” and “suicidal”.

However, conversations also revealed stark differences in coping with isolation and these were often explicitly linked by young people to their home environment, family relationships and/or level of support.

4. Education at a Distance: School and University Online

In the UK, schools moved between online and offline learning, apart from vulnerable children and those of keyworkers, and universities conducted online teaching. Throughout the pandemic, social media was replete with statements, such as “I hate online school”. But, against that wider background, young people who described having previously had mental health challenges, such as depression or anxiety, recounted going “back” to these after having previously recovered, and attributing this to online schooling.

5. Thinking about the Future

In addition to articulating the loss of events that had been imminent, such as proms, young people used social media to write of their hopelessness about the longer-term future. Across conversations this was linked with experiencing suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety.

Many young people discussed how prior to the pandemic they had imagined their lives would be better than they were now or that they now could be in the future. Linked to expressions of suicidality in particular, young people’s discussions of how they had thought they would leave school or university and get a flat, move out of their parents’ house, or have a job, were replete with articulations of fear that these would all be less viable during and after the pandemic. This worry about the future was something that many young people described continually thinking about.

This sense of hopelessness, fear and “feeling anxious” increased as the pandemic unfurled, with discussions of the social and economic repercussions of COVID-19 becoming more frequent across social media platforms. Articulations of fear about how the economic consequences of COVID-19 would curtail future job prospects were clearly associated with descriptions of feeling “depressed” and, again, “suicidal”. These employment fears were mentioned by both university students and those at school.

6. Research findings

COVID-19 control measures have had no singular or universal impact on individuals’ mental health ^{[19][20]}; the impact has been complex, nuanced and contextual.

Throughout the pandemic, there have been concerns and growing evidence that school and university closures ^{[10][21]} and social isolation ^[11] have negatively impacted mental health. The effect of social isolation and loneliness on children and young people was a concern before the pandemic and has been heightened throughout. Both have been linked with depression, poor mental health, and anxiety ^{[22][23][24]}. This correlates with the findings that social isolation ensued from being away from friends and was potentially compounded by fraught or abusive family environments. Young people described feeling trapped, depressed, anxious, and suicidal.

Disrupted education, in terms of both schools and universities, has also been cited as a cause of poorer mental health during the pandemic ^{[25][26]}. Throughout, UK public and political discourses have widely framed school in particular as a safe space to which children should return to improve their mental wellbeing. On the one hand, the findings align with this in that some young people attributed their experiences of anxiety, depression and suicidality to online schooling and isolation. They linked these with poorer social relationships, missing friends, and lower grades. However, it is also crucial to recognise that there have been continual conversations amongst young people on social media about how being away from school improved their mental health and wellbeing, with descriptions of “anxiety returning” when schools and universities reopened. As Scott, McGowan and Visram ^[27] have also suggested, “it may be that schools are not the panacea to social ills”. COVID-19 has highlighted the different experiences that young people have at school, it being both a space of socialisation and safety, but also one of anxiety.

Young people have also experienced numerous forms of grief and loss due to COVID-19. With regards to bereavement, the dataset evidenced the combined grief of both losing someone and not being able to say goodbye due to restrictions in hospitals. Bereavement in adolescence is a known risk factor for depression ^[28], with parental bereavement linked with lower educational aspirations and competence in work ^[29]. In addition, it has been suggested that grief experienced

during COVID-19 has associated “feelings of guilt, shame, isolation and abandonment” [30] and some young people described this grief as linked with depression and suicidal thoughts. Given the potential “grief pandemic” [30] that society may face, it is evident that this complex grief necessitates reflecting on in order to support young people.

Added to this complex grief is the collective grief that resonated through young people’s descriptions of how COVID-19 has “stolen” important events, such as graduation or prom. This sense of mourning the loss of life events tallies with other research [31] and was seen in the study to lead to decreased motivation to engage with school work, which was linked with depression and suicidal thoughts. The findings also point to the need to recognise prospective grief and a sense of lost future opportunity. In so doing, the data align with other studies that have found that young people feel that COVID-19 will cause reduced job opportunities [32] and that they feel hopeless about the future [33].

As such, individual affective challenges were interwoven with and underpinned by a broader sense of societal belonging and responsibility. This shows the need to move beyond a pervasive “psychocentrism” [34] in many public and political discourses about young people’s mental health during the pandemic. A notable tendency to hold up singular causes, such as school closures, has pinpointed solutions in disconnected acts such as the reopening of schools or allowing the “young” or the “healthy” freedom. In contrast to the sense of “embodied belonging” [35] that runs through young people’s narratives on social media, such solutions risk doing more harm than good through a politicised and enforced unbelonging that fails to recognise the social embeddedness of young people’s mental health.

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