

# Tackling the impact of COVID-19 on mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just threatening physical health, it also poses a major risk to mental health.

Fears about the virus, along with the effects on everyday life brought about by the lockdown and social distancing, are likely to increase anxiety, depression and other mental health issues while putting extra pressures on people already experiencing mental health problems. We also need to know about any possible short or long term effects of COVID-19 on the brain.

That's why MQ and the Academy of Medical Sciences want research into mental health and brain science to be central to the response to the pandemic. Good quality research in this area will also shed light on how to deliver the clearest health messages to prevent the spread of the disease and what must be done if COVID-19 or another pandemic emerges in years to come.

We gathered 24 world-leading experts on mental health and brain science, including people with experience of mental health problems, we invited more than 2,000 people to complete an online survey and we commissioned an Ipsos MORI poll of more than 1,000 people.

Our work has identified key questions that need answering with good quality, evidence-based research that involves people with experience of mental health problems, of COVID-19 and people who have experienced the lockdown itself.

## **What impact will COVID-19 have on the risk of anxiety, depression, and other outcomes such as self-harm and suicide?**

It is vital that we record levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide and other mental health issues across the population, but particularly for workers at the front line. In the longer term, we need to investigate how to make better use of technology to treat and support people with mental health issues during periods of social isolation – for instance providing information and therapy online or through apps, or using phone calls and texts to reach people who do not access the internet.

## **How can we promote good mental health in the wake of the pandemic and the lockdown?**

Different groups will need different approaches – a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. We need to better understand how health and social care workers can be best supported, and this will be useful now and for any future pandemics. In the longer term, we must find new ways to protect mental wellbeing, including through encouraging positive activities such as exercise and volunteering.

## **What impact will the lockdown and social isolation have on the mental health of vulnerable people? How can these impacts be reduced?**

Loss of access to the usual mental health and social support systems during lockdown can make people even more vulnerable than they already are. We have to work out the best ways of identifying and delivering mental health services for vulnerable groups during a pandemic, work out whether existing approaches can be adapted to the pandemic, and identify gaps where we will need to develop something completely new.

## **What is the impact of the wall-to-wall media coverage of the pandemic on mental health and how can wellbeing be promoted?**

Responsible and trusted media coverage and government communication is vital during a national crisis and can provide reassurance – but it can also make people more anxious and this can affect their mental health. We need to understand better the ways that media and communications contribute to distress and mental ill health. In the short term we need to research ways that allow people to stay informed without become unduly distressed. In the longer term, we need evidence-based guidelines for the media covering pandemics. We need to find ways to help people avoid becoming overly affected by the media reports.

## **What are the best ways to get people to follow the expert advice on reducing the risks of infection – without unduly increasing stress and anxiety?**

Research should focus on the best ways to communicate advice and rules about behaviour – while reducing unintended mental health issues. In the long run we must ensure that we have learned from the lessons from this pandemic. We need to motivate and allow people to plan for future pandemics and understand how to best promote people's care and concern for others.

## **What effects will the virus have on the brain and mental health?**

From studies of similar viruses, we know there is a risk the COVID-19 virus could affect the brain and may cause long term health problems. We need a database of cases to study the impacts on the brain and nervous system. In the long run we need more research to understand if and how the virus can get into the brain, how we can measure the impact any infection has and how we can develop new drugs, or use existing ones, to treat or stop infection.

## **A call for action**

- Research bringing together experts from different scientific areas of mental health and brain science must be central to the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These experts should include people with experience of mental health issues.
- The research priorities should be co-ordinated at a national and international level. We urge UK research funding agencies to work with researchers and people with experience of mental health issues to create a 'high-level co-ordination group' to ensure mental health science research priorities are tackled quickly. Long term studies are vital.
- The most immediate priority is collecting high-quality data about the mental health and psychological impacts of the pandemic across the UK population (including vulnerable groups), and whether the virus affects the brains of people infected with the disease.
- We urgently need to create, test and refine new ways to tackle the harmful impacts of the pandemic on mental health and the brain, particularly in vulnerable groups. These should include specific interventions that promote good mental health and wellbeing and reduce mental health risks, especially ones that can be delivered under lockdown conditions. We may also need drugs that could counter any toxic effects of the virus on the brain.
- There is an urgent need to research the impact of traditional and social media coverage of the pandemic on people's mental health. This will help us understand how these platforms can be used to encourage people to act in ways that help reduce the spread of the virus and reduce levels of anxiety and other mental health issues.
- New funding will be needed to meet these priorities. The UK must work with international funding bodies and researchers and support a coordinated global response.

These are challenging times. We call on our partners to support science in serving society and the public's long-term health needs by addressing the research priorities identified. The Academy of Medical Sciences and MQ stand ready to work with funders, researchers and people with a lived experience to make this happen as a matter of urgency.

You can read the full Lancet Psychiatry paper here [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30168-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30168-1) and a summary of the survey results here [www.acmedsci.ac.uk/COVIDmentalhealthsurveys](http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/COVIDmentalhealthsurveys)