

Research into the mental health effects of COVID-19 and effective interventions must be an ongoing priority – joint statement by the Academy of Medical Sciences and MQ Mental Health Research

The COVID-19 pandemic is already having – and will continue to have – an unparalleled impact on society, including on people's physical and mental health.

Against a backdrop of increased prevalence of mental health issues in the UK in recent years,^{1,2} early evidence indicates that there has been a substantial worsening of mental health in certain groups since March this year.³ Previous pandemics and economic downturns have been associated with increased suicide rates.⁴

It is vital that we understand both the direct impact of the virus on the body, brain function and mental health of patients with COVID-19, as well as the indirect mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic across the whole population and particularly in vulnerable groups. Indirect effects may occur for a variety of reasons, including working on the frontline, containment measures such as the lockdown, or the economic downturn. As well as characterising the nature of these effects, research is needed to establish effective, scalable solutions to address them. In particular, there is an urgent need for rapid upscaling of research into effective interventions so that we can address the direct and indirect mental health impacts of COVID-19.

There is also emerging evidence that SARS-CoV-2 infection has long term effects – also known as 'long COVID' – the extent of which is currently poorly understood.^{5,6} Reported possible long-term effects include fatigue, lung damage, cardiovascular, immunological, neurological and psychological consequences. Research into the long-term consequences of COVID-19 must take a joined-up approach to mental and physical health outcomes and interventions for those suffering from post-COVID-19 health problems.

In April this year, the Academy of Medical Sciences and MQ Mental Health Research convened a multi-disciplinary expert group, including experts with lived experience, to develop mental health and neuroscience research priorities to the COVID-19 pandemic and call for them to be tackled urgently. These priorities were published in a Position Paper in *The Lancet Psychiatry*.⁷ This prompted the NIHR-UKRI 'COVID-19 and mental health' highlight notice in June 2020 calling for further mental health research applications to be submitted.⁸ The Academy and MQ convened two workshops to further galvanise the mental health research community to take forward the priorities identified in the Position Paper. This resulted in the community developing two consortia bids that brought together leading researchers from relevant disciplines from across the UK to build a platform for research.

¹ McManus S, et al. (2016). *Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014*. https://files.digital.nhs.uk/pdf/q/3/mental_health_and_wellbeing_in_england_full_report.pdf

² Ford T, et al. (2020). *Data resource profile: the mental health of children and young people surveys (MHCYP)*. *International Journal of Epidemiology* **49**(2), 363–364g. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyz259>

³ [Pre-print] Kwong ASF, et al. (2020). *Mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in two longitudinal UK population cohorts*. *MedRxiv* 2020.06.16.20133116. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.06.16.20133116>

⁴ Gunnell D, et al. (2020). *Suicide risk and prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic*. *Lancet Psychiatry* **7**, 468-471. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30171-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30171-1)

⁵ Marshall M (2020). *The lasting misery of coronavirus long-haulers*. *Nature*, September 14. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02598-6>

⁶ Nabavi N (2020). *Long covid: How to define it and how to manage it*. *BMJ* **370**, m3489. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3489>

⁷ Holmes EA, et al. (2020). *Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science*. *Lancet Psychiatry* **7**, 547–60. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30168-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30168-1)

⁸ NIHR & UKRI (2020). *Highlight notice – COVID-19 and mental health*. <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/highlight-notice-covid-19-and-mental-health/24978> (published June 3).

Our workshops demonstrated an enthusiastic and co-ordinated response from researchers, but we cannot be complacent. There is evidence to suggest that COVID-19 will cast a long shadow on the mental health of the nation, which will require sustained funding in the long term.

The UK is a world leader in mental health and neuroscience research. We have opportunities to capitalise on existing research infrastructure and expertise to mount a successful holistic response to the pandemic. But to make this happen, funders need to think and act differently to make mental health research in the context of COVID-19 an urgent and ongoing priority. In particular:

- All research into the direct and indirect effects of the virus involving human participants must consider the mental health effects of COVID-19.
- Research must go beyond characterising the mental health impact of COVID-19 and funding must support the development of effective interventions to address and improve the mental health issues identified, particularly those likely to extend beyond the pandemic.
- Research funders must work with the research community to deliver funding mechanisms that address body, brain and mind research holistically, taking a joined up, inter-disciplinary approach to better understanding and treatment of long-term physical and mental health outcomes of SARS-CoV-2 infection.

If we do not place mental health at the centre of the COVID-19 research response, we will fail to learn how to intervene effectively in pandemic situations to support all those whose mental health is affected now and in the future, particularly the most vulnerable and underserved.

The UK mental health and neuroscience research community stands ready to play its part in investigating – and most importantly addressing – the impacts of COVID-19 on the mind and brain.

The Academy and MQ will continue to contribute to and support these efforts to ensure that mental health is properly included in our collective response to the pandemic going forward. We call on governments, funders and clinicians alike to join us in this mission.

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