

Research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science

The Academy of Medical Sciences and MQ fully endorse the research priorities for mental health science¹ that are published today (15 April 2020) in *The Lancet Psychiatry*.² Implementing the immediate and longer-term mental health science research priorities summarised below will ensure that mental health science is part of all aspects of the research response to COVID-19.

The paper was written by a multi-disciplinary expert Advisory Group convened by our two organisations, including experts with lived experience. We are most grateful to the Advisory Group members for their efforts in preparing this paper at such speed, as well as to all those who participated in the MQ and Ipsos MORI surveys and influenced the research priorities.

Mental health science must be central to the international response to the current pandemic, given the potential for long-term impacts on individual and population mental health, and on the brain function of some of those affected by COVID-19. Mobilising the mental health research community now will allow us to apply the learnings gained to any future periods of increased infection and lockdown. The UK has powerful advantages in utilising research to mount a successful pandemic mental health response, including world-class expertise, infrastructure, cohorts, access to clinical and population data, as well existing connections between researchers, the frontline workforce and service users. A fragmented research response, characterized by small-scale and localised initiatives, will not yield the clear insights needed to guide policy-makers or the public. It is vital that researchers and research funders meet this challenge with unprecedented levels of coordination and collaboration. **This must start with high-level coordination and leadership among our national research funders, together with researchers and those with lived experience, around the mental health science response to COVID-19, which we hope will be guided and informed by this paper.**

Rapid learnings

Rapid learnings from immediate research that could be applied to future infection waves and pandemics include:

- Evidence-based support for vulnerable groups under pandemic conditions, including frontline health and social care staff, those with pre-existing mental health issues, and particular groups of young people and older adults.
- Interventions that can be delivered under pandemic conditions to reduce mental health issues and boost wellbeing, including those that can be repurposed.
- Solutions to the impact of repeated media consumption about COVID-19 on mental wellbeing.
- Best methods for promoting successful adherence to behavioural advice about COVID-19, while enabling mental wellbeing and minimising distress.

¹ 'Mental health sciences' includes psychology, psychiatry, clinical medicine, behavioural and social sciences and neuroscience, that will need to work together in a multidisciplinary fashion together with people with lived experience.

² Holmes EA, et al. (2020). *Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science*. *Lancet Psychiatry*, published online 15 April 2020. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30168-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30168-1)

Immediate research priorities

The following immediate research priorities must be addressed.

Data collection

- **Systematic collection of high quality data on the mental health and psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across vulnerable groups and the whole population.** Electronic health records, along with new and existing recruitment platforms and cohorts, should be marshalled to develop population-based studies for specific vulnerable groups and the whole population.
- **Prioritisation of methods to determine behaviours, COVID-19 status and symptoms as close to real time as possible.** Specifically in COVID-19 patients, information is needed on brain function, cognition and mental health at all clinical stages of infection and illness.
- **Data collection under a national data portal for rapid research access and utilisation.**

Development of evidence-based interventions

- **Rapid discovery, evaluation and refinement of research-driven interventions to address the psychological, social and neuroscientific aspects of this pandemic.** This includes bespoke psychological interventions to boost resilience, promote good mental health, and minimise mental health risks across society and in vulnerable groups, as well as experimental medicine studies to develop new treatments for the possible neurotoxic effects of the virus.

Criteria for success

A successful mental health science research response to COVID-19 will require:

- A focus on rigorous, peer-reviewed and ethically-approved research, co-developed with people with lived experience, that can be translated into effective interventions.
- A research community that shares protocols, research measures and data assets, facilitated by national-level resources and infrastructure.
- Integration across disciplines and sectors, including industry, and health and social care.
- Connectivity with international funders and researchers to support a global response to the mental health and neuroscientific challenges of this pandemic.

These are challenging times. We call on funders and the research community 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.

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Academy of Medical Sciences
41 Portland Place
London W1B 1QH
+44(0)20 3141 3200

info@acmedsci.ac.uk
www.acmedsci.ac.uk
[@acmedsci](#)

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Our scientists investigate a huge range of issues: depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, eating disorders and more. We are bringing together everything from cutting-edge neuroscience to social studies to find the answers we need.

In everything MQ does, we are driven by one certainty: research can transform what it means to experience mental illness, starting now and for every generation to come. MQ is here to make sure change happens.

MQ: Transforming mental health
6 Honduras St
London EC1Y 0TH
+44 (0)300 030 8100

www.mqmentalhealth.org
Info@mqmentalhealth.org

Registered charity in England / Wales: 1139916 & Scotland: SC046075
Company number: 7406055