

It's Complicated: The Relationship Between COVID-19 and Mental Health Problems

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Abstract

At least four published studies conducted in the US, Europe, and China have suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the mental health of certain demographic groups. We examined this issue by looking at the relationship between COVID-19 prevalence and people's scores on the EMHI-r, a validated online mental health screening inventory that screens for 21 of the most prevalent MH disorders defined in the DSM-5. Validity of the EMHI-r is supported by a published report with data obtained from 201,625 individuals in 184 countries. To conduct the present analysis, we began with new EMHI-r data obtained from a diverse sample of 40,906 people from 14 countries (49.8% from the US) between March 2020 and August 2021. Because no clear relationships emerged, however, we ultimately refined our analysis in four ways: We narrowed our focus to include just four countries: the US, the UK, Canada, and Germany; we focused on just seven disorders: anxiety, depressive, eating, obsessive compulsive, phobic, somatoform, and substance use; we focused only on vulnerable demographic groups identified in previous studies; and, recognizing the fact that the virus impacts different regions at different times, we conducted asynchronous analyses. Even with these adjustments, however, we found inconsistent relationships between the prevalence of the virus and the prevalence of MH problems. We concluded that the relationship between COVID-19 and mental health problems is complex: Increases in virus prevalence is sometimes associated with declines in mental health, sometimes with improvements in mental health, and sometimes with no change at all. Onset of the illness varies from country to country, from region to region, and from one demographic group to another. Different countries and different regions within each country have responded very differently to the virus. People have responded to lockdowns, testing, and vaccination mandates in markedly different ways. COVID-19-related changes in people's mental health are also related to unique factors in their lives. The virus itself might have no specific or consistent mental health effects, or, if such effects exist, they are obscured by a number of confounding factors.