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Psychologists struggle to meet demand amid mental health crisis

2022 COVID-19 Practitioner Impact Survey

The COVID-19 pandemic which emerged almost exactly three years ago, brought the whole world to a halt. No one knew what to do, nor what to expect. Those who felt ill-prepared stocked up on essentials and we all holed up in our houses for months. The original “two weeks off” evolved into months, and almost a year. Change did not stop there. Learning was completely altered when students began learning online. The feeling of isolation remained very present, even when conversing and connecting with another peer through the screen.

During the pandemic, a way to stay connected with family and friends was through social media. Although one may be “connected” with peers, the lack of direct contact may promote social isolation for heavy users. Social isolation is the feeling of being cut off from others, or the psychological distance from loved ones. The pandemic undoubtedly increased social media use which can result in mental health issues. Social media, especially Instagram or TikTok can present unrealistic standards for lifestyle and physical appearance. The increased time spent on social media may have led many to struggle with self-esteem issues, stress, and life satisfaction. This could also be hard on others because of the concept known as “conformity”. Conformity is when one behaves in a way which they believe meets society’s standards. People want to be accepted by others; therefore, they conform and dilute their personalities until they can blend in with those who have already gained acceptance. Social media portrays a specific societal

standard, and as that standard becomes normal, those who have features which don't technically fit into that standard begin to feel self-conscious.

The past few years have also come with increased depression rates. After the pandemic years, nearly 1 in 10 Americans report to have symptoms of depression, (Reinberg, 2022). This could be from a multitude of reasons. Catherine Ettman from the National Library of Medicine wrote that, "Individuals with lower social resources, lower economic resources, and greater exposure to stressors (eg, job loss) reported a greater burden of depression symptoms. Post-COVID-19 plans should account for the probable increase in mental illness to come, particularly among at-risk populations" (Ettman, 2020, para. 10). Those who cannot afford necessities because of job loss, or a decrease in income may fall into a depression and suffer from a great deal of stress. Social individuals who need that physical connection to feel happiness or joy could also feel depression symptoms because of the pandemic.

These issues; social media use, isolation, and stress can all lead to depression. This consistent and persistent feeling of sadness known as depression can also be caused by a variety other factors. Depression results in a loss of interest for things one used to enjoy, physical problems, and can decrease productivity. The condition is also tied very closely with anxiety. Anxiety or anxiousness is an emotion which presents itself with tense, nervous, worried, and restless feelings. Those struggling with an anxiety disorder feel these emotions with such vigor that they interfere with daily activities. People with social anxiety fear social interaction because they feel as though they will be judged or embarrassed. Similarly, those with separation anxiety feel fear or uneasiness when separated from loved ones. When these conditions are left untreated, panic attacks, substance abuse, poor quality of life, and suicidal thoughts may ensue.

In an article published by the American Psychological Association, a concern for the demand of mental health services is voiced. As the pandemic continues, and the population needing help grows,

psychologists are having a hard time meeting the demand for the care needed. According to the data presented in the report, the increase of unemployed patients was 27% (APA, 2022, para. 4). This is probably connected to the pandemic, along with the fact that the largest increase in patients was seen in the adolescent age. This age group tends to spend the greatest amount of time on social media. 60% of psychologists stated that they are unable to treat the increasing number of patients (para. 6). Many of them have an extensive waitlist or are unable to manage one because of the sheer number of patients. This could result in psychologist burnout and the inability to meet the demand that patients seek.

A concern that the statistics present is one surrounding stigma. Stigma is shame or judgement put onto something or someone which stems from misinformation along with assumptions. Stigmas around mental health can portray mentally ill people as incapacitated, lazy, or looked down upon. There is also a belief that depression or anxiety is a sign of weakness or moral failure. As the number of people seeking help increases, there must also be an increase in those affected, yet scared or ashamed of help. Stigma can worsen one's condition by putting them down or shaming them for it or prevent them from seeking help in fear of judgement. This is an example of normative influence which also ties into conformity. Normative influence is when someone changes their behaviors to be accepted by others. Those who are depressed or suffer from anxiety may not speak up in order to avoid judgement. They may fear that by opening up about their mental illness, they lose acceptance and open themselves up to exclusion. Instead of fully opening up about their mental health, they may cope with humorous remarks. Those affected who are unable to receive the help they need may experience an increase in symptoms and a further worsening of their mental health.

Before the pandemic, I had never had any issues with mental illness. I regret to admit that prior to experiencing depression and anxiety symptoms, I used to believe that people who were affected were weak and exaggerating. I used to think I was better than them because, instead of processing my emotions, I would hide them in a corner of my mind and ignore them. I didn't feel sad, but I also had a

hard time acknowledging what I was feeling. Now that I can relate to those struggling with their mental health, I understand the sadness that it comes with, however I also recognize that feeling the emotions you are going through is much healthier than ignoring them. I think this is a strange occurrence of an in-group bias. An in group or out group bias is when people favor those who are “like them” or in their group, rather than those who are in the out group. This impacts judgements that we make based on race, age, or gender. For example, we can look at elections. When voting for one party, you may prefer to be friends with people who share the same views, or like people who share those views more. You may also believe that people who share your views are smarter, or better. Another example could be cliques in high school. When in a group of friends, one may have a feeling of being superior than the other groups. In my case, when I felt like those suffering from mental illness were weak, I had an ingroup bias for those who were not strongly affected by sadness or mental illness. Now that I consider myself someone affected by my mental health, I consider those who choose to ignore how they feel as “less smart”.

In conclusion, the topic of the pandemic increasing depression relates to many topics we learned about. Conformity, influence, social biases, and stigmas. The excessive use of social media during the pandemic could keep you in touch with others but could also greatly affect the users’ mental health by creating unrealistic expectations which they may feel the need to conform to. Job loss and financial stress during the past years has increased depression rates and enrollment in therapy. Those struggling with these issues may not reach out for help or discuss the extent of their struggles due to fear of judgment because of preexisting stigmas and assumptions. It is up to those who are affected or know what it is like to struggle with mental health to slowly break down the stigma. Media can promote wrong assumptions about mental

illness, like the presentation of psychopaths being always dangerous, or those with schizophrenia being violent. If that is the only image you have of people with mental illness, your predisposed notion would be to fear them or judge them. However, this is not a correct representation of people who struggle with their mental health. When hearing misinformation being spread, it is important to speak up and spread correct information. Similarly, if you catch yourself making these assumptions, it is a good idea to catch yourself and think about why you are thinking in that way.

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