

# Issue At A Glance:

## Mental Health Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the US

*The COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions will have lasting effects on mental health, particularly on vulnerable populations. This brief provides an overview of potential adverse mental health outcomes resulting from the pandemic.*

More than 100 countries including the United States have been impacted by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). COVID-19 is an infectious disease that quickly spreads between people via droplets produced from talking, sneezing, or coughing. People who are infected may have no symptoms; mild symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath, fever, and loss of taste and smell; or severe symptoms such as organ failure and septic shock.<sup>1</sup> Between late February and mid-May of this year, more than 80,000 deaths have been reported in the US as a result of COVID-19. Currently, no vaccine or antiviral treatment exists for this virus.<sup>2</sup>

When COVID-19 became a pandemic, the US government took measures to limit the person-to-person spread of the virus. Individuals infected with the virus are being isolated to prevent others from catching the disease. State and local governments have issued “shelter in place” orders to enact social distancing and slow the spread of the virus. Schools and businesses have been closed, millions have been laid off from work, large gatherings and conferences have been cancelled, and people are being asked to conduct their work and school from home.<sup>3</sup> The social isolation, stress, fear and grief resulting from the pandemic are expected to result in severe adverse mental health outcomes.

### *Did You Know?*

The annual cost of depression is roughly \$210 billion in the US, predominantly due to lost productivity.<sup>4</sup>

*If you need help for emotional distress, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 for free at any hour.*

*If you prefer texting, text the Crisis Text Line at 741-741.*

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# Psychological Distress Related to the Pandemic

## Depression and Depressive Disorders

The social distancing measures involve isolation and quarantine. Isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and may increase the risk for depression and depressive disorders.

Depression symptoms include feelings of hopelessness, sadness, irritability, frustration, lack of energy, sleep disturbances, appetite disturbances, difficulty in decision making, and suicidal ideation.<sup>5</sup> Suicide rates increased by 31 percent from 2001 to 2017 and suicide was the tenth leading cause of death in the US in 2017.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic could further increase these figures.

## Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

The large amount of pandemic-related media reports, conflicting messages from authority figures, and misinformation on the internet can trigger feelings of stress and anxiety. Moreover, individuals may be fearful of getting infected or loved ones falling ill as a result of the virus. An additional stressor related to this pandemic is the limited access to basic supplies such as toilet paper and soap due to a shortage resulting from panic buying and hoarding.<sup>7</sup>

## Trauma-and Stressor-Related Disorders

While exposure to a pandemic does not currently meet the criteria for diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it is still a concern given the historical increase in PTSD cases following large-scale disasters.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, experts believe that the “shelter in place” mandate will lead to a spike in trauma as a result of domestic violence and child abuse.<sup>8</sup>

Domestic violence advocates raised concern over the “safer-at-home” order verbiage by arguing that homes are not safe places for domestic violence victims who may be “trapped with their abusers.”<sup>9</sup>

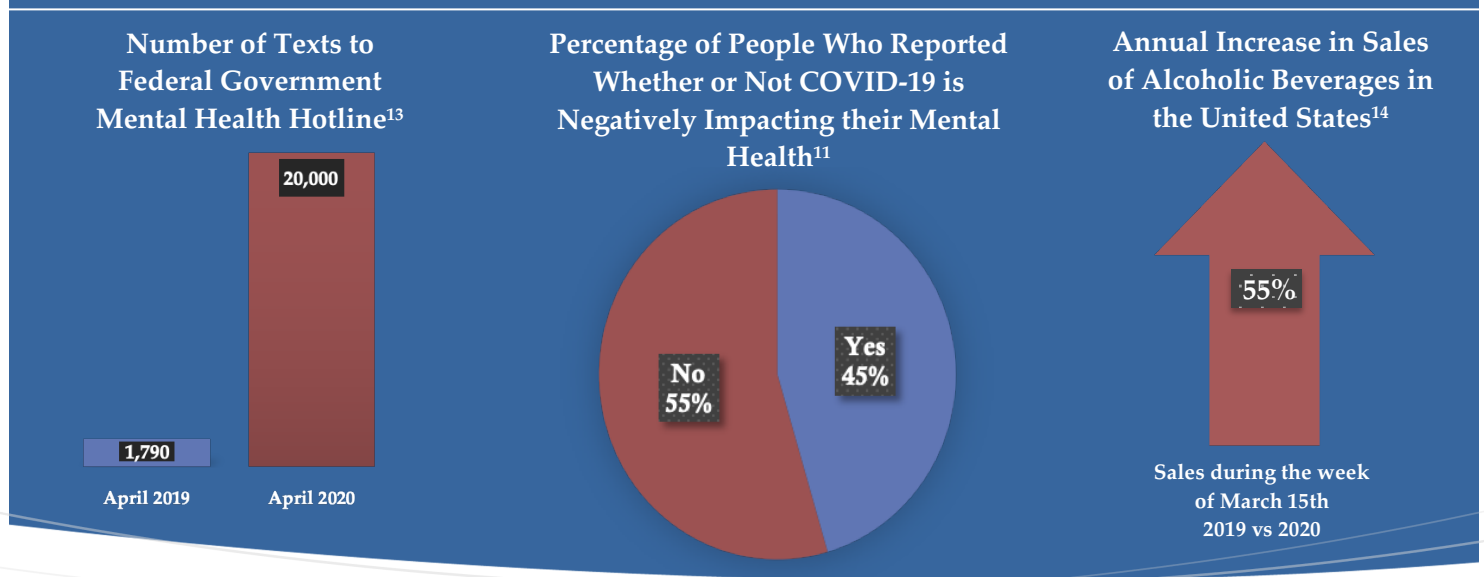
## Substance Use and Addictive Disorders

Stress, fear, and depression can prompt unhealthy behaviors such as use of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs. Rates of substance misuse are already higher in individuals with mental illness. The pandemic can exacerbate these behaviors, increasing the risk for acquiring respiratory illnesses and COVID-19 complications.<sup>10</sup>

# Economic Repercussions of COVID-19 and Effects on Mental Health

Due to business closures and stay-at-home orders, millions of people lost their jobs and income along with their health insurance. A Kaiser Family Foundation poll revealed that more than half of those who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic reported negative impacts on their mental health.<sup>11</sup> Historical studies indicate that job loss is often associated with increased depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute anticipates that a 20-percentage point increase in unemployment (similar to the levels of the 1930s Great Depression) could result in 18,000 additional suicides and over 22,000 overdose deaths.<sup>12</sup>

## Facts and Figures Highlighting the Initial Mental Health Repercussions of COVID-19



## Populations Most Vulnerable to Adverse Mental Health

While this virus is likely to affect almost everyone, certain groups of people may be more vulnerable to adverse mental health effects as a result of the pandemic. People who contract the disease, people who are at high risk for contracting the disease, and people with pre-existing mental health conditions have an elevated risk. Adults over the age of 60 years, homeless individuals, migrant workers, and frontline workers such as grocery store employees and healthcare providers have the highest risk of contracting the disease.<sup>15</sup> These groups, along with youth and households with children as well as victims of domestic violence, are more likely to face emotional distress and long-term psychological illnesses.<sup>16</sup>

Older adults are already at a higher risk of experiencing morbidity and mortality from COVID-19, and the decreased interactions with caregivers and loved ones as a result of physical and social distancing may exacerbate feelings of loneliness and anxiety that are commonly felt by this population. Moreover, many elderly individuals who are food insecure may struggle to find sources of nutrition, further worsening mental health. Many seniors also had difficulty finding basic supplies during the initial weeks of the pandemic due to other's panic buying.<sup>17</sup>

Another vulnerable population is the youth.<sup>16</sup> Rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and use of electronic nicotine delivery products have been on the rise for the last decade in adolescents. School closures and limited interactions with peers may disproportionately worsen the mental health of the youth. Adults with children are also reporting higher levels of mental distress due to balancing childcare and work.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, frontline workers are at higher risk. Grocery store employees were being required to work without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).<sup>18</sup> Healthcare workers, who already experience burnout at higher levels than the general population, face adverse mental health from patient overload, grief from patient deaths, and fear of infecting family members. Consequently, households with healthcare workers also report adverse mental health.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, migrant farm workers in the US are keeping up the food supply but continue to work without PPE, medical insurance, and government relief during this time.<sup>20</sup>

Telemedicine has become the mainstream mode for providing care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people, however, still cannot receive mental health treatment due to cost, loss of health insurance, lack of internet access, and stigma associated with seeking help. Experts are recommending the general public to limit exposure to media and news related to the pandemic, develop a daily routine, and virtually keep in contact with friends and family. Healthcare professionals are also drawing attention to the increased need for mental health surveillance through routine mental health screenings.<sup>21</sup>

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair and eyes, wearing a light blue surgical mask. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a plain, light gray.

May is recognized as  
Mental Health  
Awareness Month in  
the United States.



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Questions?

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