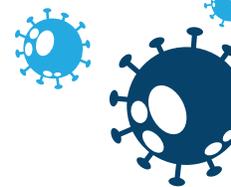


Mental Health during COVID-19



It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during and after a stressful situation.

Everyone reacts differently, and your own feelings will change over time. Notice and accept how you feel. Self-care during a stressful situation will help your long-term healing. Taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and protect yourself and your loved ones.

Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders

Psychotic disorders are severe illnesses that affect the mind. They include schizophrenia and a number of lesser-known disorders. Psychotic disorders cause abnormal thinking and perceptions, and can lead to people losing contact with reality. Two of the main symptoms are delusions (believing things that are not true) and hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not real, such as voices). Those experiencing the symptoms of psychotic disorders can have a significant change in their thoughts and behaviour.

Impact of COVID-19 on Psychotic Disorder Symptoms

The COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary public health measures taken to protect the population from the virus, have caused significant stress for many people. Therefore, it is expected that this will impact mental health. Life stressors, including stressful life events like this pandemic, are risk factors for both the development of new psychotic disorders and the worsening of symptoms for those with pre-existing psychotic disorders. It is also expected that the pandemic may impact the nature and content of the symptoms of people with psychosis or at risk of psychosis. See below for some of the ways symptoms may be affected:

Paranoia: The COVID-19 related fear experienced by many in the general population may be magnified for those who already experience paranoia as part of their illness (ex. Believing that those in power are misleading us, especially in the face of frequently changing evidence and advice to deal with the pandemic). They may also have increased paranoia around contamination from being in close contact with other people.

Delusions: Some may incorporate COVID-19 into their long-held delusional beliefs (ex. The illuminati being in control of the world pandemic). Others may develop new delusions related to COVID-19 (ex. Believing that the virus is being pumped through the vents in their room).

Hallucinations: New hallucinations may develop or the frequency of hallucinations may increase due to stress. People who experience hallucinations may attribute information they receive to their “voices” or hear the viruses making noises.

Thought Disorder: Some individuals with psychotic disorders can experience serious disorganization of their thoughts or speech, which can be worse during times of stress. This may make it difficult for them to understand and follow COVID-19 related safety procedures. It may also make it more difficult for them to communicate their needs to others (ex. if they have some COVID-19 symptoms and need to be tested).

Disorganized behaviour: Some individuals with psychotic disorders can experience very disorganized behaviour, which can be worse during times of stress. This may make it difficult for them to follow COVID-19 related safety procedures (ex. hand hygiene, physical distancing, etc.). It may also lead to them being in situations that increase risk of transmission of the virus to themselves or others (ex. physical altercations with others, use of items that do not belong to them, etc.).

Increased Risk From COVID-19

Vulnerable to infection: People living with psychotic disorders may be at increased risk of getting COVID-19. Because of their illness, and the associated social disadvantage, many people with psychotic disorders live or spend time in settings that are at increased risk of outbreaks due to shared spaces and overcrowding (ex. hospital inpatient units, supported housing, homeless shelters, prisons).

Risk of worse outcomes: People living with psychotic disorders may also be at risk of worse outcomes from COVID-19 than the general population. Risk factors for severe infection from COVID-19 are highly prevalent in those with psychotic disorders due to lifestyle factors and side-effects from psychiatric medications (ex. smoking, obesity, heart and lung disease, diabetes, high cholesterol). Also, people with psychotic disorders experience reduced access to healthcare (ex. through delayed presentation, misinterpretation of symptoms as part of psychosis, and stigmatising attitudes of health professionals) which may affect outcomes following infection with COVID-19.

Potentially decreased ability to follow public health guidance: Individuals with cognitive deficits as a result of their psychotic disorder may not understand what this is all about, leading to their inability to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. This may prevent some from following infection control measures. Disorganized patients may struggle with following public health guidance such as hand hygiene, physical distancing, or any necessary self-isolation.

Increased Risk of Mental Health Impacts from COVID-19

More vulnerable to the social effects of COVID-19: The social effects of COVID-19 may disproportionately impact people with psychotic disorders or at risk of psychotic disorders. For example, social isolation, unemployment, homelessness, relationship breakdown (divorce/separation), domestic violence, and worsening physical health, may all particularly affect people with psychotic disorders because they already have increased vulnerability to social determinants of health.

Significant impact of physical distancing measures: This group may also be particularly at risk from the stress associated with physical distancing measures as they already tend to be more socially isolated, and struggle with social interactions more than the general population. Also, rates of use of mobile phones and technology in individuals with psychotic disorders are lower than in the general population, therefore they may not compensate as much with other methods of communication.

Risk of relapse or deterioration with treatment for COVID-19: The mental health of those with psychotic disorders could also be at increased risk from treatments for COVID-19. Evidence is showing that treatment with high dose steroids can be helpful in the treatment of serious illness with COVID-19. However, steroids have been known to trigger or worsen psychotic symptoms.

Impact on Mental Health Care

Added Challenges with Virtual Care: Remote forms of communication can increase patients' paranoia as they are required to communicate through electronic tools. Also, auditory hallucinations can interfere with one's ability to communicate by telephone. The patient may mix up all the voices, including the psychiatrist's. The loss of visual cues may seriously compromise communication between doctor and patient.

Decreased access to mental health care: As with most non-urgent health care services, there is the potential for disruption of psychiatry and other addictions and mental health services during more restrictive stages of the pandemic. This may lead to less frequent clinical contact for those with psychotic disorders. During the pandemic there are potential barriers to admission to inpatient units that may not exist otherwise. For example, inpatient units may have to reduce the number of beds in order to allow for physical distancing. Passes from inpatient units may not be allowed in order to reduce risk of transmission, but this may lead some individuals to be unwilling to be admitted even when it may be in their best interest. Some therapeutic groups may not be offered during admissions.

Suspension of community services: Many individuals with psychotic disorders rely on various community services to help them maintain their function and level of well-being in the community. Some of these community services may be suspended during some phases of the pandemic.

Disruption of medication supply chains: During the pandemic, there have been reports of disrupted medication supply chains. It also may be more difficult for individuals to access refills on their current medications.

What steps can be taken to help?

- 1. Support those at risk:** Careproviders should identify and support high-risk patients
- 2. Clinical contact:** More frequent clinical contact with healthcare providers can help address emerging concerns, which may help avoid severe exacerbations or hospitalizations.
- 3. Medication supply:** Ensure individuals have adequate supplies of medications to avoid interruption in dosing during potential disruptions of pharmacy supply chains.
- 4. Reminders of Public Health measures:** Those with significant cognitive deficits or disorganized thoughts/behaviour may require reminders multiple times a day to get them to adopt new habits such as washing their hands more often and practicing social distancing.
- 5. Assistance for those in need of testing or self-isolation:** Assist individuals who require testing and/or self-isolation by helping them navigate the system and connecting them with resources to find an appropriate place for self-isolation if needed.
- 6. Reduce crowding:** Efforts to reduce crowding in homeless shelters, hospital inpatient units, supportive housing, prisons, etc. could help to reduce risk.
- 7. Social contact:** Efforts to regularly reach out to individuals who are socially isolated, and may not seek social contact themselves, may decrease the social impact of COVID-19.

People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms. If you experience stress reactions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak for several days in a row and are unable to carry out normal responsibilities because of them, contact your health care provider or your local addictions and mental health centre.

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength.

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience as a result of COVID-19 is getting to be too much, there are options available to you:

CHIMO Helpline - Help is just a phone call away: 1-800-667-5005

Hope for Wellness Helpline - The Hope for Wellness Helpline offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous people across Canada: 1-855-242-3310

Kids Help Phone - Text TALK to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868 to chat with a volunteer Crisis Responder 24/7.

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