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Preprint · March 2020

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.11798.09281

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Negative mental health effects of COVID-19 pandemic and panic

Domina Petric, MD

ABSTRACT

We should all behave very responsible during the COVID-19 pandemic, but radical social isolation of all population is not maybe the best solution. We must not be neither paranoid, nor careless, but wise, targeting the golden mean and think not only about physical health, but on mental health as well.

INTRODUCTION

In late December 2019, a cluster of unexplained pneumonia cases has been reported in Wuhan, China. A few days later, the causative agent of this mysterious pneumonia was identified as a novel coronavirus, named as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the relevant infected disease has been named as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) by the World Health Organization respectively. The COVID-19 epidemic is spreading in China and all over the world now¹.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND PANIC

Moukadam N (MD, PhD) and Shah A (MD) explained that COVID-19 is now affecting more than 27 countries, raising concerns of widespread panic and increasing anxiety in individuals subjected to the (real or perceived) threat of the virus. These concerns arise with all infections, including the flu and other agents, and the same universal precautions are needed and indicated for safety and the prevention of further transmission.

Media coverage has highlighted COVID-19 as a unique threat, rather than one of many, which has added to panic, stress, and the potential for hysteria.

Pandemics are not just a medical phenomenon, but affect individuals and society on many levels, causing disruptions. Stigma and xenophobia are two aspects of the societal impact of pandemic infectious outbreaks. Panic and stress have also been linked to outbreaks. As concerns over the perceived threat grow, people may start to collect (and hoard) masks and other medical supplies. This is often followed by anxiety-related behaviors, sleep disturbances, and overall

lower perceived state of health. Individuals with mental illness may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of widespread panic and threat².

Professor David Forbes (University of Melbourne, Australia) explained that “Coronavirus isn’t only taking a physical toll, it’s playing with our minds, too. But there are steps we should all be taking to keep ourselves mentally well.”

Being banned from attending popular social recreational events on top of already existing self-isolation and quarantine instructions is catastrophic, but these necessary restrictions will have short and potentially long-term mental health impacts. Critical is how we as individuals and as a society manage and deal with the emotional, psychological and social impacts of this uncertainty and crisis: from the issues surrounding self-isolation and managing the panic that manifests as fights over toilet paper and outbursts of racism³.

Most reviewed studies about the psychological impact of quarantine reported negative psychological effects including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger. Stressors included longer quarantine duration, infection fears, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, and

stigma. Some researchers have suggested long-lasting effects. In situations where quarantine is deemed necessary, officials should quarantine individuals for no longer than required, provide clear rationale for quarantine and information about protocols, and ensure sufficient supplies are provided⁴.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

As of midnight March 19, 2020 the Government of Croatia is implementing extensive measures of social distancing. These measures include banning of public gatherings, closure of restaurants, cafes, bars, night clubs, shopping centers, sports and fitness centers, museums, cinemas, theatres, places of worship, hairdressers, beauty parlors and similar services where close human contact can be expected⁵.

As the COVID-19 disease spreads outside of China, countries like Italy, Iran and Spain are leading the world in new coronavirus cases. Italy began a massive quarantine of the country’s northern Lombardy region early in March and has since extended this lockdown to the entire country. Many people have been ordered to stay home unless commuting to work is absolutely essential, and no one is allowed to leave the country⁶.

I agree that we should all behave very responsible, but radical isolation of all population is not maybe the best solution. We must not be neither paranoid, nor careless, but wise, targeting the golden mean and think not only about physical health, but on mental health as well.

Solar UV radiation (UV) acts as the principal natural virucide in the environment. UV radiation kills viruses by chemically modifying their genetic material, DNA and RNA⁷.

Taking this into account it is beneficial to be outside when it is sunny, not in a group of people, but rather alone. Using the beneficial virucidal effect of UV radiation might be more effective in COVID-19 pandemic control than the radical isolation of all population at home, especially for those who were not exposed to the virus and do not belong to the at-risk population (elderly, immunocompromised patients).

COVID-19 AND ECONOMY

The global economy is already in a recession as the hit to economic activity from the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has become more widespread, according to economists polled by Reuters amid a raft of central bank stimulus actions this week. The spread of the disease has sent financial

markets into a tailspin despite some of the biggest emergency stimulus measures since the global financial crisis announced by dozens of central banks across Europe, the Americas, Asia and Australia.

The panic was clear in stocks, bonds, gold and commodity prices, underlining expectations of severe economic damage from the outbreak.

More than three-quarters of economists based in the Americas and Europe polled this week, 31 of 41, said the current global economic expansion had already ended, in response to a question about whether the global economy was already in recession⁸.

Many people are being fired during COVID-19 pandemic what is important risk factor for the development of mental health issues in addition to extensive measures of social distancing and quarantine. These individuals are now the most vulnerable group of people when it comes to mental and financial health.

COVID-19 AND SPIRITUALITY

Church leaders across Europe have urged solidarity and prudence in response to the coronavirus pandemic, with Catholic Masses now suspended in some countries and restricted to small congregations in others. In Spain, the Bishops' Conference suspended all talks, concerts and catechesis sessions on church premises, and urged Catholics with chronic diseases, elderly, weakened or with potential risk, and those who live with them to follow Masses via the media. In Poland the 151-member bishops' conference called off its planned 12-13 March plenary, while its president, Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, urged Catholics to use a special dispensation to stay away from Sunday Mass and watch or listen to services on TV or the radio instead. He also recommended increasing the number of Sunday Masses to aid smaller congregations, and said the Church would be close to those in quarantine or fearful for relatives⁹.

A major evangelical church in Brazil has won a court battle to remain open despite warnings that large gatherings will help spread the coronavirus¹⁰.

Despite that the measures of social distancing are necessary in pandemic, canceling out all religious gatherings might have negative impact on mental health especially at Easter time, and not only for

religious people, because these gatherings contribute to the healthy sense of community, tradition and national identity.

CONCLUSION

We should all behave very responsible during the COVID-19 pandemic, but radical social isolation of all population is not maybe the best solution. We must not be neither paranoid, nor careless, but wise, targeting the golden mean and think not only about physical health, but on mental health as well.

Using the beneficial virucidal effect of UV radiation might be more effective in COVID-19 pandemic control than the radical isolation of all population at home, especially for those who were not exposed to the virus and do not belong to the at-risk population (elderly and immunocompromised patients).

Despite that the measures of social distancing are necessary in pandemic, canceling out all religious gatherings might have negative impact on mental health especially at Easter time, and not only for religious people, because these gatherings contribute to the healthy sense of community, tradition and national identity.

We must be aware that COVID-19 pandemic has negative impact on global economy.

Many people are being fired during the pandemic what is important risk factor for the development of mental health issues in addition to extensive measures of social distancing and quarantine. These individuals are now the most vulnerable group of people when it comes to mental and financial health.

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