

# Pandemic Scales Up Cases of Mental Illnesses

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*The global pandemic of the new coronavirus worsens day after day worldwide, bringing with it a series of harms for humanity. As it is known, in addition to the simple infection by the virus, the pandemic causes problems in society as a whole and which daily put the lives of millions of people at risk, such as hunger and misery, which are increasingly aggravated by social chaos. However, what has most caught the attention of health authorities recently is the overwhelming increase in the number of mental illnesses. Social isolation, risk, the global atmosphere of fear and tension, as well as anxiety about the near future are affecting the population with almost the same speed and intensity as the virus itself, contributing greatly to the collapse of the international society.*

In a report this week, UN health experts warned that COVID-19 currently poses a serious risk to mental health across the planet. The statement highlights several regions of the planet where the risks are greater, in addition to selecting the vulnerable groups most specifically threatened by the growing wave of mental illness. Among the most vulnerable groups are children, the elderly and health professionals.

“Isolation, fear, uncertainty, economic turmoil – all this causes or can cause psychological problems (...) The mental health and well-being of entire societies have been severely affected by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently”, said Devora Kestel, director of the World Health Organization’s mental health department.

Another problem that has been increasing exponentially is the incidence of domestic violence crimes. In several countries, police records of attendances to such occurrences grow on a frightening scale, mainly due to the psychological imbalance to which spouses are constantly subjected during home confinement.

The main problem, however, still seems to be the social factor. In times of economic crisis and recession, despair becomes a common trend among people. Lacking any prospects, millions of individuals are left to fend for themselves, unable to count on their former jobs and in many cases without any government support, as seen in most of the poorest countries. With no forecast of improvement, with an exponential and overwhelming growth of the disease, what remains is a cruel struggle for survival with the few resources available. This is the ideal scenario for the emergence of all sorts of psychological disorders. Helpless by the health service and without enough money to resort to private treatment, many people succumb to such diseases – often without even realizing that they are being affected by them.

The great challenge that is presented, however, is to manage a pandemic situation with escalating mental illnesses. For decades, governments around the world have neglected

mental health and, although they have developed complex and efficient public health mechanisms, they have kept their populations vulnerable and unprotected against this type of “invisible threat”. Now, the results are seen in the most tragic way and the management of this scenario will be much more difficult. In fact, to save their citizens from mental illness, governments will have to invest heavily in distance therapy mechanisms and online psychological and psychiatric duty. Equally, it will be necessary to invest in social programs of financial support and emergency aid for the poorest, preventing them from being victimized by evils such as hunger and misery, which inevitably lead to despair.

In the published report, WHO experts proposed a series of public policies to alleviate the reported ills, guiding governments to seek “to reduce immense suffering among hundreds of millions of people and to mitigate long-term social and economic costs for the society”. Such measures include remedying a historic lack of investment in psychological services, providing “emergency mental health” through remote therapies, such as tele-counseling for frontline health professionals, and working proactively with people who already have depression and anxiety, as well as people at high risk of suffering domestic violence and acute impoverishment.

There is still no official research reporting concrete data on the global number of suicides in this pandemic period. It is possible and even probable that in several regions of the planet the numbers are going up considerably. Unfortunately, a research of this nature is not classified as a priority in times of great calamity, which is why we will hardly know in time to prevent major damages. The most promising, however, is to know that at least something has already started to be done and that mental illnesses are being reported and their affected people are receiving treatment recommendations.

We do not know which governments will heed the recommendations. In most countries, the structure of public health does not even include the number of people infected by the virus itself, and the treatment of mental illness is an even more distant reality. In these cases, the pandemic and misfortune cannot be blamed, but the neglect of public health that has characterized most countries in recent decades. Mental illnesses have not arisen now, they have always existed and our international social structure favors their spread even more. Every year, the number of people with mental disorders increases, as does the number of suicide cases. The neglect does not come from now, just an old “time bomb” is exploding amid an even greater chaos. Perhaps, therefore, the most important would be the legacy to be left to the post-coronavirus world.

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