



Mental Health in the Pandemic: Addressing Societal Well-being in the Midst of COVID-19

Hamza Khalifa Ibrahim¹, Abduladim Alfadel sakeb², Aejeeliyah Yousuf³,
Abdulfatah Saed⁴

^{1,4}Department of Pharmacy Technology, Higher Institute of Medical Sciences and Technologies, Bani Waleed, Libya

³Laboratory Technology Department, Higher Institute of Medical Sciences and Technologies, Bani Waleed, Libya

*Corresponding author: hamza.khalifa@imst.edu.ly

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted global mental health, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress across various demographic groups. This research adopts a comprehensive approach, integrating quantitative analysis, qualitative exploration, and stakeholder engagement to delve into the societal repercussions of mental health during this unprecedented crisis. Vulnerable communities, notably low-income families and frontline workers, confront amplified challenges. The study underscores the imperative for targeted interventions, community-centric support structures, and policy reforms to elevate mental health services as a priority. Noteworthy findings reveal a marked escalation in mental health issues compared to the pre-pandemic era. Policy recommendations advocate for the prioritization of accessible and comprehensive mental health services, exemplified by initiatives like Australia's \$1.1 billion mental health package. Education emerges as a pivotal player, with suggestions to infuse mental health literacy within school curricula and professional training modules. Furthermore, workplaces are urged to roll out extensive mental health programs, directly influencing productivity. The research champions the continuous exploration of evidence-based interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness practices, alongside combating stigma through public awareness initiatives. By fostering transparent communication and destigmatizing mental health support-seeking, communities can cultivate resilience and well-being amidst the unparalleled challenges presented by COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, Mental Health, Pandemic, Depression.

تأثير الصحة العقلية في ظل الجائحة: معالجة الرفاهية المجتمعية في خضم جائحة كوفيد-19

حمزة خليفة إبراهيم^{1*}، عبد العظيم الفضيل اسكيب²، اعجيلية يوسف³، عبدالفتاح سعد⁴
^{1,4} قسم تقنية الصيدلة، المعهد العالي للعلوم والتقنيات الطبية، بني وليد، ليبيا.
² قسم تقنية المختبرات، المعهد العالي للعلوم والتقنيات الطبية، بني وليد، ليبيا

الملخص

لقد أثر جائحة كوفيد-19 بشكل كبير على الصحة العقلية العالمية، مما أدى إلى زيادة مستويات القلق والاكتئاب والتوتر بين مختلف الفئات الديموغرافية. يتبنى هذا البحث نهجاً شاملاً، يدمج التحليل الكمي والاستكشاف النوعي وإشراك أصحاب المصلحة للتعلم في التداييم المجتمعية للصحة العقلية خلال هذه الأزمة غير المسبوقة. تواجه المجتمعات الضعيفة، ولا سيما الأسر ذات الدخل المنخفض والعاملين في الخطوط الأمامية، تحديات متزايدة. وتؤكد الدراسة على ضرورة التدخلات المستهدفة، وهياكل الدعم التي تركز على المجتمع، وإصلاحات السياسات لرفع مستوى خدمات الصحة العقلية كأولوية. تكشف النتائج الجديرة بالملاحظة عن تصعيد ملحوظ في قضايا الصحة العقلية مقارنة بعصر ما قبل الوباء. تدعو توصيات السياسات إلى إعطاء الأولوية لخدمات الصحة العقلية الشاملة والمتاحة، ويتجلى ذلك في مبادرات مثل حزمة الصحة العقلية الأسترالية بقيمة

1.1 مليار دولار. يبرز التعليم كلاعب محوري، مع اقتراحات لغرس معرفة الصحة العقلية في المناهج المدرسية و وحدات التدريب المهني. وعلاوة على ذلك، يُحث أماكن العمل على إطلاق برامج واسعة النطاق للصحة العقلية، مما يؤثر بشكل مباشر على الإنتاجية. ويدعم البحث الاستكشاف المستمر للتدخلات القائمة على الأدلة، مثل العلاج السلوكي المعرفي وممارسات اليقظة الذهنية، إلى جانب مكافحة الوصمة من خلال مبادرات التوعية العامة. ومن خلال تعزيز التواصل الشفاف وإزالة وصمة العار عن طلب الدعم في مجال الصحة العقلية، يمكن للمجتمعات أن تنمي المرونة والرفاهية في خضم التحديات غير المسبوقة التي يفرضها كوفيد-19.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كوفيد-19، الصحة العقلية، الوباء، الاكتئاب.

Introduction

The global outbreak of COVID-19 since late 2019 has not only posed significant health and economic challenges but has also profoundly affected mental health across the globe. This study, titled "Mental Health in the Pandemic: Addressing Societal Well-being in the Midst of COVID-19," seeks to explore the multifaceted impacts of this pandemic on mental well-being, drawing from a blend of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Prior research has already indicated a surge in anxiety, depression, and stress levels among various demographic groups, particularly affecting vulnerable communities like low-income families and frontline workers [7] [9]. These challenges underscore the pressing need for tailored interventions and robust support systems. As the pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues compared to pre-pandemic times, there's an urgent call for policy reforms to prioritize mental health services. Countries like Australia have already taken steps in this direction with substantial investments, such as the \$1.1 billion mental health package, highlighting the importance of accessible and comprehensive mental health care.

Education also emerges as a critical avenue for addressing mental health challenges. Integrating mental health literacy into educational curricula and workplace training programs can play a pivotal role in early identification and support. Workplaces have a direct influence on employees' mental well-being. Implementing comprehensive mental health programs can not only support employees but also positively impact productivity and organizational success.

Societal Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted societal well-being, particularly in the realm of mental health. The ongoing unprecedented and devastating COVID-19 pandemic continues to claim lives, disrupt and divert resources from health systems and have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of peoples across the world [2]. Across the globe, individuals, families, and communities have experienced a surge in anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders due to prolonged exposure to uncertainty, fear of illness, and social isolation. Parents with a history of adversity may have been at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems during this time [7]. The magnitude of mental health crisis would be greater in countries with more severe outbreak and more stringent containment policies. During the initial phase of the outbreak in China, moderate-to-severe anxiety and depression symptoms were reported by 28.8% and 16.5% respondents, respectively [1]. This surge has strained mental health facilities and professionals, revealing existing gaps in healthcare systems. Vulnerable communities, often with limited access to resources, have borne a disproportionate burden, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and equitable access to mental health services. Young people, facing disrupted routines and limited social interactions due to school closures, have been significantly affected, necessitating focused efforts in educational and social systems. During pandemic, social restrictions such as quarantine, hospital visitation restrictions, and travel restrictions limited the availability of social and emotional support [5]. The pandemic was not only a health shock but also an economic one that led to sharp falls in labor demand and supply in many sectors of the economy [6]. Moreover, the workforce has grappled with remote work challenges, economic uncertainties, and job insecurities, leading to increased stress and burnout among employees. For example, many communities have observed increased prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, unemployment or underemployment, and food insecurity (caused by supply chain disruptions, business closures, empty store shelves, and inadequately stocked food pantries), to name just a few of the social and economic disruptions. Thus, aside from causing stress related to the virus itself, the pandemic will have substantial and long-lasting effects on mental health through pathways created by these social determinants. Social distancing measures have amplified feelings of isolation and loneliness, especially among vulnerable populations such as the elderly. To foster long-term societal resilience, it is imperative to address these challenges through a multidisciplinary approach. This includes destigmatizing mental health issues, integrating mental health support structures into community networks, and implementing comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that span healthcare, social services, education, and policy-making efforts. By acknowledging the societal impacts of mental health during the pandemic and implementing these holistic approaches, societies can work towards promoting resilience and well-being, even in the midst of the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19.

The relevance and impact of the social determinants of health and mental health have been tragically demonstrated yet again by the disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many people are aware of the prominent

inequities that have been revealed afresh by the pandemic. In this column, we outline some of the ways in which the social determinants of mental health both mediate and moderate the mental health impacts of the pandemic and measures for its containment (Figure 1). By “mediate,” we mean that the pandemic and containment measures lead to social determinants, which in turn lead to adverse mental health outcomes. By “moderate,” we mean that existing social determinants in society can influence the strength of the association between the pandemic and containment measures and adverse mental health outcomes, such that the relationship is stronger among groups experiencing pre-existing social determinants.

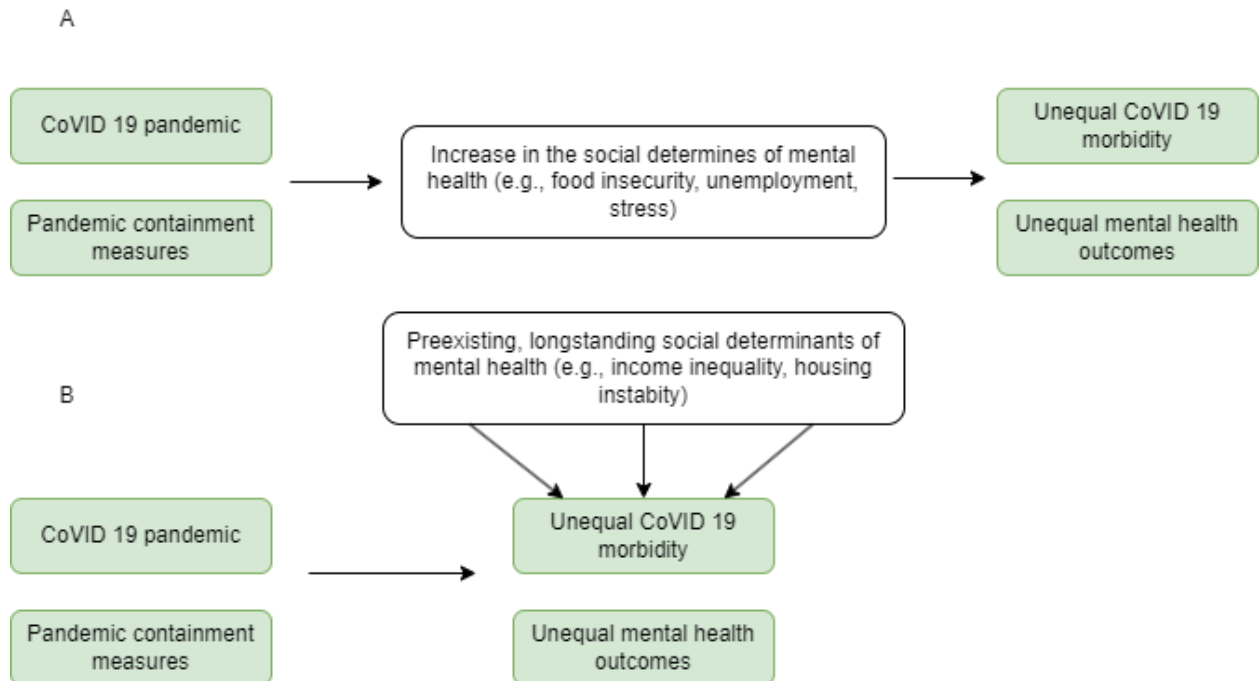


Figure 1 . Effect of social determinants of mental health on the unequal prevalence and mental health consequences of COVID-19

Methodologies

In this research effort, a comprehensive approach was adopted to study the social impact of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and address social well-being. The methodology closely examined existing literature, mental health reports, and epidemiological policies, which laid the foundation for understanding the context. In children and young people with some pre-existing mental health conditions, we found evidence that symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, general psychopathology, and mental distress significantly worsened at the start of the pandemic in 2020 [3]. Qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and open-ended surveys, were used to capture important experiences of individuals and communities. Quantitative surveys and structured questionnaires were administered to collect numerical data on prevalence rates and access to mental health services. A comparative analysis was conducted, which compared data from the pre-pandemic and epidemic periods, which allowed to identify trends and disparities across demographics and regions.

Stakeholder engagement played an important role in this research, with mental health professionals, policymakers, academics, and affected people actively participating. The principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) were applied, providing the necessary context-specific insights while ensuring that communities are actively involved in the research process. A critical analysis of existing mental health policies and epidemiological interventions was conducted, informing evidence-based policy recommendations and the design of targeted interventions. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to, ensuring the rights and well-being of the participants.

The collected data was closely analyzed using statistical software to gain meaningful insights. Identifying recurring themes and patterns, thematic analysis was applied to quality data. The results are presented through clear concepts, such as charts and graphs, enhance the understanding of quantitative data. Continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms were put in place, allowing for real-time adjustments and reforms in strategies. This repetitive process ensured that interventions remained accountable to emerging societal needs. By combining these approaches, this research aims to have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the social impact of mental health during the pandemic. Through this complex and comprehensive approach, the study provided valuable insights into the field, enabling the development of targeted and evidence-based interventions to support social well-being amid the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19.

Results and Implications

Studies on the societal impact of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic yielded important insights into the multifaceted challenges facing individuals and communities. The quantitative analysis revealed a significant increase in anxiety, depression and stress levels across different demographic groups, indicating a widespread mental health crisis caused by the pandemic. Qualitative data provided nuanced narratives that captured the experiences of people dealing with loneliness, uncertainty, and grief. More fine-grained quantitative and qualitative investigations of the experiences of groups particularly at risk of adverse outcomes are also warranted and of drivers of variations both in the general population and among people with pre-existing mental health conditions [4]. Vulnerable communities, including low-income families and frontline workers, were disproportionately affected, highlighting the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on mental health.

Comparative analyses illustrated the seriousness of the situation, with pre-pandemic mental health data showing significant deviations from the current mental health scenario. Stakeholder engagement revealed diverse perspectives, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted interventions and community-driven support systems.

Table 1 Impact of COVID-19 on Psychological Distress, Malignancy, and Chronic Diseases [7]

Effect of COVID-19 on Psychological Distress and Malignancies	Psychological Distress: Elevated incidence of anxiety, nervousness, and distress among cancer patients compared to the general public. The longer the treatment plan, the greater the depression. Precise assessment of pandemic's impact on psychiatric illnesses in cancer patients is required.
Malignancies	Antipsychotic medications with anti-inflammatory characteristics may defend against severe COVID-19 by inhibiting cytokine waves. Exacerbation of psychological distress among cancer patients due to the pandemic.
COVID-19 and Its Impact on Immunosuppression Diseases	Immunotherapy and Infections: Immunotherapy is a significant trigger for COVID-19 infection. Clinical observations indicate cancer-related anaemia and fatigue as initial predictive factors of COVID-19 patients. Haematological and pathological assessments may serve as valuable screening tools.
Chronic Diseases	Anemia in CKD patients is frequently caused by reduced erythropoietin supply, making them more susceptible to COVID-19. Connection between anemia, fatigue, and increased death rates in COVID-19 patients.
COVID-19 and Its Impact on Diabetes, Hypertension, and chronic kidney diseases	Diabetes: High blood glucose levels contribute to significant mortality rates. Hyperglycemia and high blood pressure mildly connected to COVID-19 severity and mortality rates. Increased knowledge and awareness among diabetic patients are crucial.
Hypertension and Cardiovascular Diseases	High blood pressure and heart disease frequently linked with both COVID-19 severity and morbidity. Effective management and monitoring of these conditions during the pandemic are essential.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only brought about physical health challenges but has also significantly impacted mental health across populations worldwide. Alongside the direct psychological distress caused by the pandemic, there has been an observed increase in the prevalence of antipsychotic combinations among psychiatric patients. This rise can be contextualized within the broader landscape of mental health management during the pandemic, reflecting both pre-existing trends and new challenges faced by healthcare systems.

Antipsychotic combinations, involving the co-prescribing of multiple antipsychotic medications, have shown a variable prevalence, ranging from 4% to 70%. Notably, regions such as Arizona, South Africa, Ethiopia, China, and Japan have reported higher incidences. Factors contributing to this trend include the evolving definition of antipsychotic medications, variations in health coverage availability for psychiatric patients, and the growing neuropsychology knowledge among healthcare experts.

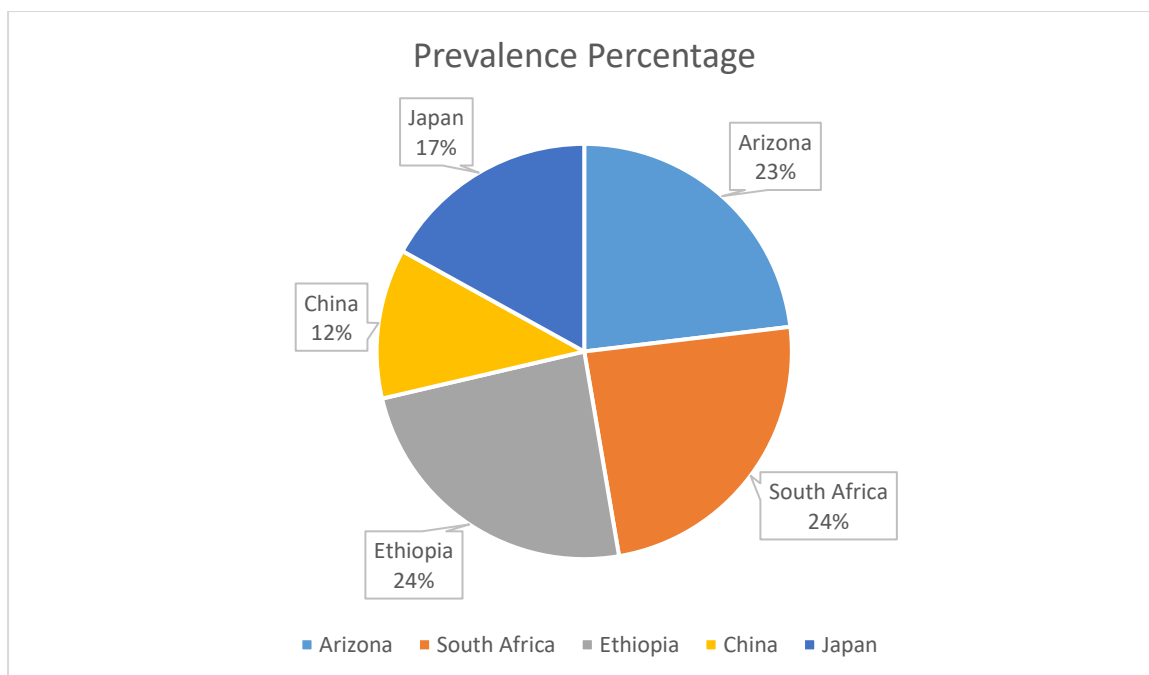


Figure 2 Prevalence and Implications of Antipsychotic Combinations [8]

Several reasons underpin the increased utilization of antipsychotic combinations. These encompass intervention resistance, medication switching, justification for elevated doses, and the use of antipsychotics to manage chronic psychotic comorbid conditions and sleeplessness. While these combinations offer benefits in minimizing and regulating psychotic symptoms, they are not without their drawbacks. Side effects associated with these combinations range from extrapyramidal symptoms, neuroleptic malignant disorder, and elevated prolactin to cardiovascular risks, weight gain, metabolic disruptions, and even life-threatening conditions like sudden cardiac arrest.

Given the profound implications of the pandemic on mental health, including the management and treatment strategies for psychiatric disorders, the observed rise in antipsychotic combinations warrants attention and further investigation. It is essential to strike a balance between leveraging the benefits of these combinations and mitigating the associated risks, especially in the context of a global health crisis [8].

Implications:

During a pandemic, significant policy changes are required. These reforms should prioritize mental health services, making them more accessible, affordable, and inclusive. Prioritization of mental health and deliberate appropriation of financial resources to tackle mental health issues by policy makers are crucial measures. Access to publicly funded mental health therapy should be widely promoted. In this vein, the Australian government in pandemic released a \$1.1 billion package to boost mental health services to the Australian people battling the devastating impacts of COVID-19. This represents a positive step in the right direction. By filling existing gaps and allocating resources to fill vulnerable populations, policymakers can significantly expand the mental health support structure. Engaging with local communities to develop appropriate mental health measures, support networks, and awareness campaigns can effectively meet specific needs. The emphasis on mental health education is of paramount importance. Integrating mental health literacy into school curricula and workplace training programs equips individuals with the necessary coping mechanisms and reduces the stigma associated with mental health problems. Health workers should be trained to identify early signs of undue stress/burnout at work and seek help immediately. Other practical measures include incorporating rotations from higher-to lower stress tasks and team “huddles” to ease tensions within the workplace. Regular clinical screening for anxiety, depression and other mental health issues might be useful for both health workers and patients infected with COVID-19. Multidisciplinary mental health and crisis teams will need to be constituted and made accessible by health workers, patients and community members. Provision of psychological counselling hotlines and online channels may help to boost access to such teams by the above groups. Expanding telehealth services for mental health counseling emerges as a practical solution, especially for those living in remote areas. Investing in telemedicine infrastructure can facilitate wider access to mental health support, ensuring that distance does not limit access to critical services. Workplaces also play an important role in promoting mental health. Employers should implement comprehensive mental health programs in the workplace, create supportive environments, promote work-life balance, and provide access to counseling services. Recognizing that employee well-being directly affects productivity and job satisfaction, these measures are not only ethical but also strategic.

This study advocates for ongoing research into evidence-based interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness practices. Continued research will inform the development of effective mental health treatments and supportive strategies, ensuring interventions are based on cutting-edge scientific understanding. Destigmatization efforts are central to the proposed interventions. Public awareness campaigns and stereotypes are important for challenging and encouraging individuals to seek help. By fostering open conversations about mental health, facilitating them through media, social platforms, and community events, societies can create an environment where mental health support seeking is normalized.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted mental health across the globe, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among various groups of people. This study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and robust support systems, especially for vulnerable communities such as frontline workers and low-income families. Countries like Australia have set examples by investing heavily in mental health services. Education emerges as a crucial tool in addressing these challenges; integrating mental health literacy into school curricula and workplace training can equip individuals with essential coping skills and help reduce stigma. The pandemic has also seen a rise in the use of antipsychotic medications, indicating the complexities of managing mental health during this crisis. It's essential to balance the benefits of these treatments with potential risks. Policy changes are crucial; governments should prioritize mental health, making services more accessible and inclusive. Engaging local communities in crafting tailored mental health initiatives and awareness campaigns can effectively address specific needs. Continued research into evidence-based interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness practices is vital. Alongside this, efforts to destigmatize mental health issues through public awareness campaigns can help normalize seeking help for mental health concerns. As we continue to face the challenges of COVID-19, putting mental health at the forefront of global efforts is essential. By working together across sectors and communities, we can build resilience, promote well-being, and ensure that mental health remains a priority in our response to this ongoing crisis.

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