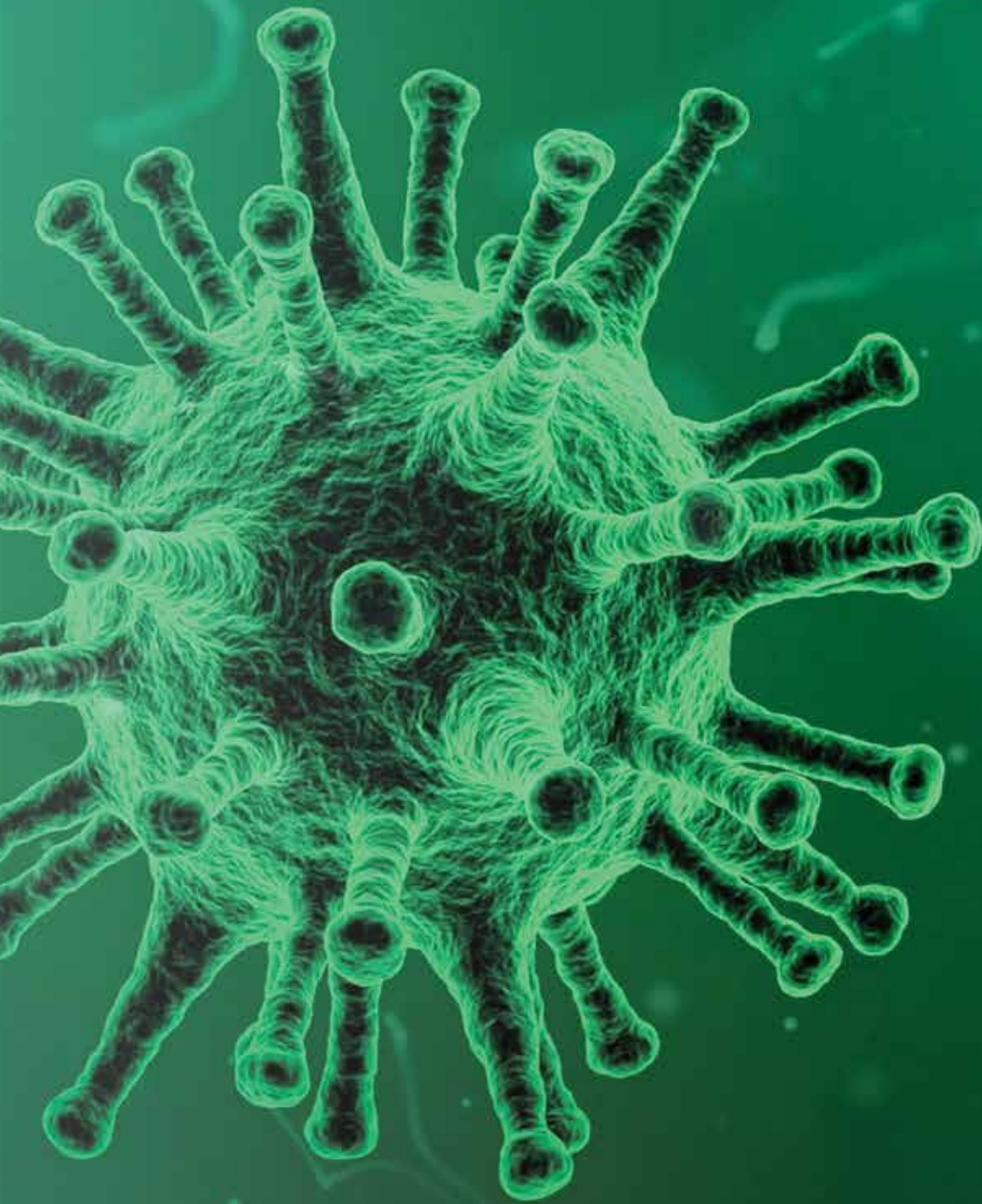


Coping with the Psychological Impact of COVID-19

World economies are crumbling as world leaders continue to announce restrictions intended to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus disease. From a few cases that were first reported in China's Wuhan city, in December 2019, the disease, which was later declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic, rapidly spread across the world, and eventually caused paralysis in all sectors.



As of April 17, 2020, more than 22 million Americans had filed for unemployment benefits since the United States of America President Donald Trump declared the coronavirus disease outbreak a national emergency.

Because businesses have been forced to close in an effort to stem the spread of COVID-19, the consequence for employers in different sectors of the U.S economy was to lay off staff. According to The Washington Post, many companies that remain open report a huge drop-off in sales.

«Individuals can psychologically blame the pandemic rather than themselves.... But [what] might follow is that organizations may realize, the longer this goes on, that they don't need as many people. That is, that technology could replace many. That will be the biggest fear and longer-term consequence» Sarah Damaske, an associate professor of sociology, labor and employment relations at Pennsylvania State University, said.

The situation may not be as bad elsewhere in the world but the unemployment rates, globally, are on the rise with predictions of a fall in foreign investment especially in third world countries.

«This is going to be a global pandemic of unemployment» David Blustein, a professor of counseling psychology at Boston College and the author of *The Importance of Work in an Age of Uncertainty: The Eroding Work Experience in America*, said. «I call it a crisis within a crisis» Blustein told the BBC.

Losing a job comes with its psychological effects, and it can be worse in the current times of the COVID-19 anxiety.

While statistics show that deaths recorded as a result of other ailments are higher as compared to the COVID-19 deaths, the speed at which this new

A range of psychological responses to quarantine happens such as confusion, fear, anger, grief, numbness, and anxiety-induced insomnia.

pandemic spreads is what is most frightening. More than 2.2 million people had tested positive for the disease as of April 18, 2020. This explains why governments around the world announced social-distancing guidelines – the WHO has recently renamed it physical distancing, while those that show symptoms of the disease or have been in contact with a COVID-19 patient are quarantined.

Impact of quarantine

Researchers; Samantha K. Brooks, Rebecca K. Webster, Louise E. Smiths, Lisa Woodland, Prof. Simon Wessely, Prof. Neil Greenberg, et al. reviewed the psychological impact of quarantine using three electronic databases based on previous mandatory quarantines and revealed negative psychological effects such as post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger.

They compiled their findings in a report titled, «The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence», which was published on February 26, 2020 by The Lancet, a weekly medical journal headquartered in London, United Kingdom.

«Quarantine is often an unpleasant experience for those who undergo it. Separation from loved ones, the loss of freedom, uncertainty over disease status, and boredom can, on occasion, create dramatic effects,» the report notes.

Among the data sets that were reviewed were of people who were quarantined after the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and it was discovered that the people who were quarantined because of being in close contact with those who potentially had SARS reported various negative responses during the quarantine period.

Different responses

Fear, nervousness, sadness, and guilt were reported plus a few reported positive feelings of happiness and relief. Furthermore, the study also identified a range of other psychological responses



Right:
D. David Blustein



to quarantine, such as confusion, fear, anger, grief, numbness, and anxiety-induced insomnia.

«All other quantitative studies only surveyed those who had been quarantined and generally reported a high prevalence of symptoms of psychological distress and disorder. Studies reported on general psychological symptoms, emotional disturbance, depression, stress, low mood, irritability, insomnia, post-traumatic stress symptoms, anger, and emotional exhaustion» the report partly reads.

Another study, SARS Control and Psychological Effects of Quarantine, Toronto, Canada, made similar conclusions, noting that quarantine might

There will be people who have related traumas in their lives; they're more vulnerable to any stressful event.

result in considerable psychological distress in the forms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depressive symptoms.

Conditions of lockdown

The causes of these above stressors, according to the authors of «The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence, are connected to spending longer durations in a quarantine, fears of getting infected, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma.

Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, a lecture at the Department of Philosophy at Uganda's Makerere University, was among the 1,092 people who were quarantined upon arrival in the East African country from Europe and the Middle East before the country's leadership announced a total lockdown.

Initially, they were to spend 14 days under the institutional quarantine but the authorities extended the period by more than a week.

He told Flashes that the conditions under which one is quarantined impact on how they cope.

«It all depends on one's circumstances and resilience. Some are quarantined in undesirable conditions far off from their normal lives. That's bound to be more traumatizing. Some quickly accept and adapt» Dr. Ssentongo said.

Dr. Ssentongo further points to factors such as what one misses when being quarantined – whether they have a family; children or not, their lifestyle, and available emotional support.

«A very social person stands a higher risk of being traumatized by being quarantined. Life there is the opposite of their inclination. People who miss out on vital opportunities under quarantine also become very vulnerable. Anger, withdrawal, suicidal thoughts, confusion, [and] low concentration are among the possible results. But the particular one to happen to a person depends on a wide range of personal and social factors» Dr. Ssentongo said.

Out of the quarantine, stigma follows them to their communities. In various research reports, stigmatization features prominently, often continuing for some time after the quarantine, even after containment of the outbreak.

Participants in several studies reported that others were treating them differently: avoiding them, withdrawing social invitations, treating them with fear and suspicion, and making critical comments.

Mitigating the effects

In a podcast by the American Psychological Association (APA), Prof. Baruch Fischhoff, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University and an expert on public perception of risk and human judgment and decision-making, gave his thoughts on the psychological effects of being quarantined.

«There will be people who have related traumas in their lives; they're more vulnerable to any stressful event. I think if one did a systematic interview person by person, you would find some variability. You would also find that some people's lives are more disrupted than others, if they're responsible for a vulnerable family member, or if they don't have the economic ability to withstand the loss of income for this period of time» Prof.



Fischhoff said.

«I think that what one sees superficially at a group level is what people usually do. They're resilient, they're mutually supportive, they rally to one another, [and] they try to make the best of a bad situation. If we rely on people's natural resilience and if the authorities respectfully treat them and minute in and attend to their material needs as well as they can, one would expect most people, I believe, to get through it well» he added.

The officials should quarantine individuals for no longer than required, provide a clear rationale for quarantine and information about protocols, and ensure sufficient supplies are provided.



In their report, Brooks, Webster, Smiths, Woodland, Prof. Wessely, Prof. Greenberg, et al. recommend that in situations where quarantine is deemed necessary, the officials should quarantine individuals for no longer than required, provide a clear rationale for quarantine and information about protocols, and ensure sufficient supplies are provided.

They wrote; «If quarantine is essential, then our results suggest that officials should take

every measure to ensure that this experience is as tolerable as possible for people. This can be achieved by telling people what is happening and why, explaining how long it will continue, providing meaningful activities for them to do while in quarantine, providing clear communication, ensuring basic supplies (such as food, water, and medical supplies) are available, and reinforcing the sense of altruism that people should, rightly, be feeling.»