

Early empirical study on COVID-19 related depression and anxiety gives reason for optimism

23 July 2020, by Marissa Shapiro



Autumn Kujawa. Credit: Vanderbilt University

The pandemic is having profound effects on mental health for people around the world. One of the first longitudinal studies to assess COVID-19 related stressors and mental health symptoms led by Autumn Kujawa, assistant professor of psychology and human development, shows that many people will recover as the situation improves.

A preprint of the article, "Exposure to COVID-19 Pandemic Stress: Associations with Depression and Anxiety in Emerging Adults in the U.S." was published online on June 29 in *PsyArXiv*.

For Kujawa, who typically studies neural and emotional responses contributing to the development of depression and [anxiety](#), understanding how people are managing their emotions amid an entirely new experience was of interest. "COVID-19 has widespread impacts ranging from minor annoyances like not being able to get [toilet paper](#) to major stressors, including physical health concerns and even loss of life, uncertainties about the economy, loneliness or conflictual relationships with roommates and partners," said Kujawa. "We set out to determine how to measure and assess the ways that the impact of these stressors is shaping peoples' mental health."

Kujawa's lab created a Pandemic Stress Questionnaire (PSQ) that was distributed to a diverse sample of 450 emerging adults in the U.S., including [minority groups](#), via online platform in May. Kujawa and her lab found that the PSQ offers empirical support for the range of interruptions to daily life that people are experiencing, and how those relate to the risk for depression and anxiety. Questions on the PSQ assessed experiences ranging from being separate from loved ones to changes in employment status to experiences of racism and discrimination for participants. One month later, 288 participants completed a follow-up questionnaire to assess the stability of the PSQ and prospective associations between stress and internalizing symptoms.

The May results showed very high rates of stress exposure, particularly among participants who identified as women or as Black. The results are suggestive that these groups are suffering the burden of the pandemic more than others. Rates of depression and anxiety were also very high in May, but when the PSQ was redistributed in June, the rates of depression and anxiety decreased across

all groups. This reduction shows that for many, there may not be lasting depression and anxiety, and as the world recovers from the pandemic so too will people's mental health.

"We're all experiencing loss and hardship, together and individually. It is normal to feel sadness, anger and a sense of grief connected to how the pandemic is impacting our lives," said Kujawa. "If someone is feeling depressed or down every day and cannot do normal tasks, is not enjoying anything anymore, or is thinking about death or suicide, those are all signs that it is time to get help. One thing to note is that many [mental health](#) providers are offering their services online so that people can get the help they need safely. Reaching out to get help is very important for coping with these experiences and recovering from depression or anxiety."

Kujawa intends to distribute the PSQ again in a few months to measure how the impacts of the [pandemic](#) on peoples' lives have changed. Kujawa notes that those struggling should do their best to seek professional guidance to get through this period but remains optimistic. She said, "We do think that the decrease in symptoms from May to June shows hope that people will get through this immensely challenging time."

More information: Autumn Kujawa et al.
Exposure to COVID-19 Pandemic Stress:
Associations with Depression and Anxiety in
Emerging Adults in the U.S. *PsyArXiv*. DOI:
10.31234/osf.io/aq6u5

Provided by Vanderbilt University

APA citation: Early empirical study on COVID-19 related depression and anxiety gives reason for optimism (2020, July 23) retrieved 30 April 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-early-empirical-covid-depression-anxiety.html>

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