

The Effects Of Social Isolation On Well-Being And Life Satisfaction During Pandemic

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Abstract

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic placed many locations under „stay at home” orders and adults simultaneously underwent a form of social isolation that is unprecedented in the modern world. Perceived social isolation can have a significant effect on health and well-being. Further, one can live with others and still experience perceived social isolation. However, there is limited research on psychological well-being during a pandemic. In addition, much of the research is limited to older adult samples. This study examined the effects of perceived social isolation in adults across the age span. Specifically, this study documented the prevalence of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the various factors that contribute to individuals of all ages feeling more or less isolated while they are required to maintain physical distancing for an extended period of time. Survey data was collected from 309 adults who ranged in age from 18 to 84. Items included both Likert scale items and open-ended questions. A “snowball” data collection process was used to build the sample. While the entire sample reported at least some perceived social isolation, young adults reported the highest levels of isolation, $\chi^2(2) = 27.36, p < 0.001$. Perceived social isolation was associated with poor life satisfaction across all domains, as well as work-related stress, and lower trust of institutions. Higher levels of substance use as a coping strategy was also related to higher perceived social isolation. Respondents reporting higher levels of subjective personal risk for COVID-19 also reported higher perceived social isolation. The experience of perceived social isolation has significant negative consequences related to psychological well-being.

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, prompting most governors in the world to issue stay-at-home orders in an effort to minimize the spread of COVID-19. This was after several months of similar quarantine orders in countries throughout Asia and Europe. As a result, a unique situation arose, in which most of the world’s population was confined to their homes, with only medical staff and other essential workers being allowed to leave their homes on a regular basis. Several studies of previous quarantine episodes have shown that psychological stress reactions may emerge from the experience of physical and social isolation. In addition to the stress that might arise with social isolation or being restricted to your home, there is also the stress of worrying about contracting COVID-19 and losing loved ones to the disease. For many families, this stress is compounded by the challenge of working from home while

also caring for children whose schools had been closed in an effort to slow the spread of the disease. While the effects of social isolation has been reported in the literature, little is known about the effects of social isolation during a global pandemic. Although there are fewer studies with young and middle aged adults, there is some evidence of a similar pattern of greater isolation being associated with negative psychological outcomes for this population. There is also considerable evidence that social isolation can have a detrimental impact on physical health). In a meta-analysis of 148 studies examining connections between social relationships and risk of mortality concluded that the influence of social relationships on the risk for death is comparable to the risk caused by other factors like smoking and alcohol use, and greater than the risk associated with obesity and lack of exercise. Likewise, other researchers have highlighted the detrimental impact of social isolation and loneliness on various illnesses, including cardiovascular, inflammatory, neuroendocrine, and cognitive disorders. Understanding behavioral factors related to positive and negative copings is essential in providing health guidance to adult populations.

Feelings of belonging and social connection are related to life satisfaction in older. While physical distancing initiatives were implemented to save lives by reducing the spread of COVID- 19, these results suggest that social isolation can have a negative impact on both mental and physical health that may linger beyond the mitigation. It is therefore important that we document the prevalence of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the various factors that contribute to individuals of all ages feeling more or less isolated, while they are required to maintain physical distancing for an extended period of time. It was hypothesized that perceived social isolation would not be limited to an older adult population. Further, it was hypothesized that perceived social isolation would be related to individual's coping with the pandemic. Finally, it was hypothesized that the experience of social isolation would act as a mediator to life satisfaction and basic trust in institutions for individuals across the adult lifespan.

Procedures:

Researchers recruited a sample of people that varied by age, gender, and ethnicity by identifying potential participants across academic and non-academic settings using professional contact lists. A "snowball" approach to data gathering was used. The researchers sent the survey to a broad group of adults and requested that the participants send the survey to others they felt would be interested in taking part in research. Recipients received an email that contained a description of the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. Included at the end of the email was a link to the online survey that first presented the study's consent form. Participants acknowledged informed consent and agreed to participate by opening and completing the survey.

At the end of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to supply an email to participate in a longitudinal study which consists of completing surveys at later dates. In addition, the sample was asked to forward the survey to their contacts who might be interested.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study suggests that perceived social isolation is a significant element of health-related quality of life during pandemic. Perceived social isolation is not just an issue for older adults.

Indeed, young adults appear to be suffering greatly from the distancing required to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2. The experience of social isolation is associated with poor life satisfaction across domains, work-related stress, lower trust of institutions such as central government and business, perceived personal risk for COVID-19, and higher levels of use of substances as a coping strategy. Measuring the degree of perceived social isolation is an important addition to wellness assessments. Stress and social isolation can impact health and immune function and so reducing perceived social isolation is essential during a time when individuals require strong immune function to fight off a novel virus. Further, it is anticipated that these widespread effects may linger as the uncertainty of the virus continues. As a result, we plan to follow participants for at least a year to examine the impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the well-being of adults.

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