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IDEAS

# The Pandemic Did Not Affect Mental Health the Way You Think

The world's psychological immune system turned out to be more robust than expected.

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The Atlantic

JULY 4, 2021

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You've probably heard that the coronavirus pandemic triggered a worldwide mental-health crisis. This narrative took hold almost as quickly as the virus itself. In the spring of 2020, [article](#) after [article](#)—even [an op-ed](#) by one of us—warned of a looming psychological epidemic. As clinical scientists and research psychologists have [pointed out](#), the coronavirus pandemic has created many conditions that might lead to psychological distress: sudden, widespread disruptions to people's livelihoods and social connections; millions bereaved; and the most vulnerable subjected to long-lasting hardship. A global collapse in well-being has seemed inevitable.

We joined a [mental-health task force](#), commissioned by *The Lancet*, in order to quantify the pandemic's psychological effects. When we reviewed the best available data, we saw that some groups—including people facing financial stress—have experienced substantial, life-changing suffering. However, looking at the global population on the whole, we were surprised not to find the prolonged misery we had expected.

We combed through close to 1,000 studies that examined hundreds of thousands of people from nearly 100 countries. This research measured many variables related to mental health—including anxiety, depression, and deaths by suicide—as well as life satisfaction. We focused on two complementary types of evidence: surveys that examined comparable groups of people before and during the pandemic and studies tracking the same individuals over time. Neither type of study is perfect, but when the same conclusions emerged from both sets of evidence, we gained confidence that we were seeing something real.

Early in the pandemic, our team observed in these studies what the media was reporting: Average levels of anxiety and depression—as well as broader psychological distress—climbed dramatically, as did the number of people experiencing clinically significant forms of these conditions. For example, in both the U.S. and Norway, reports of depression rose three-fold during March and April of 2020 compared with averages collected in previous years. And in a study of more than 50,000 people across the United Kingdom, 27 percent showed clinically significant levels of distress early in the pandemic, compared with 19 percent before the pandemic.

[Read: This is not a normal mental-health disaster](#)

But as spring turned to summer, something remarkable happened: Average levels of depression, anxiety, and distress began to fall. Some data sets even suggested that overall psychological distress returned to near-pre-pandemic levels by early summer 2020. We share what we learned in a paper that is forthcoming in *Perspective on Psychological Science*.

We kept digging into the data to account for any anomalies. For example, some of the data sets came disproportionately from wealthy countries, so we expanded our geographic lens. We also considered that even if the pandemic didn't produce intense, long-term distress, it might have undercut people's overall life satisfaction. So, members from our team examined the largest data set available on that topic, from the Gallup World Poll. This survey asks people to evaluate their life on a 10-point scale, with 10 being the best possible life and zero being the worst.

Representative samples of people from most of the world's countries answer this question every year, allowing us to compare results from 2020 with preceding years. Looking at the world as a whole, we saw no trace of a decline in life satisfaction: People in 2020 rated their lives at 5.75 on average, identical to the average in previous years.

We also wondered if the surveys weren't reaching the people who were struggling the most. If you're barely holding things together, you might not answer calls from a researcher. However, real-time data from official government sources in 21 countries showed no detectable increase in instances of suicide from April to July 2020, relative to previous years; in fact, suicide rates actually declined slightly within some countries, including the U.S. For example, California expected to see 1,429 deaths by suicide during this period, based on data from prior years; instead, 1,280 occurred.

We were surprised by how well many people weathered the pandemic's psychological challenges. In order to make sense of these patterns, we looked back to a classic psychology finding: People are more resilient than they themselves realize. We imagine that negative life events—losing a job or a romantic partner—will be devastating for months or years. When people actually experience these losses, however, their misery tends to fade far faster than they imagined it would.

The capacity to withstand difficult events also applies to traumas such as living through war or sustaining serious injury. These incidents can produce considerable anguish, and we don't want to minimize the pain that so many suffer. But study after study demonstrates that a majority of survivors either bounce back quickly or never show a substantial decline in mental health.

Human beings possess what some researchers call a psychological immune system, a host of cognitive abilities that enable us to make the best of even the worst situation. For example, after breaking up with a romantic partner, people may focus on the ex's annoying habits or relish their newfound free time.

Lucy McBride: By now, burnout is a given

The pandemic has been a test of the global psychological immune system, which appears more robust than we would have guessed. When familiar sources of enjoyment evaporated in the spring of 2020, people got creative. They participated in drive-by birthday parties, mutual-assistance groups, virtual cocktail evenings with old

friends, and nightly cheers for health-care workers. Some people got really good at baking. Many found a way to reweave their social tapestry. Indeed, across multiple large data sets, levels of loneliness showed only a modest increase, with 13.8 percent of adults in the U.S. reporting always or often feeling lonely in April 2020, compared with 11 percent in spring 2018.

But these broad trends and averages shouldn't erase the real struggles—immense pain, overwhelming loss, financial hardships—that so many people have faced over the past 17 months. For example, that 2.8 percent increase in the number of Americans reporting loneliness last spring represents 7 million people. Like so many aspects of the pandemic, the coronavirus's mental-health toll was not distributed evenly. Early on, some segments of the population—including women and parents of young children—exhibited an especially pronounced increase in overall psychological distress. As the pandemic progressed, lasting mental-health challenges disproportionately affected people who were facing financial issues, individuals who got sick with COVID-19, and those who had been struggling with physical and mental-health disorders prior to the pandemic. The resilience of the population as a whole does not relieve leaders of their responsibility to provide tangible support and access to mental-health services to those people who have endured the most intense distress and who are at the greatest ongoing risk.

But the astonishing resilience that most people have exhibited in the face of the sudden changes brought on by the pandemic holds its own lessons. We learned that people can handle temporary changes to their lifestyle—such as working from home, giving up travel, or even going into isolation—better than some policy makers seemed to assume.

As we look ahead to the world's next great challenges—including a future pandemic—we need to remember this hard-won lesson: Human beings are not passive victims of change but active stewards of our own well-being. This knowledge should empower us to make the disruptive changes our societies may require, even as we support the individuals and communities that have been hit hardest.

