

Grief and loss in the age of COVID-19: The collective mental health impacts of the pandemic

by Tara Faghani Hamadani

As the COVID-19 pandemic presents social, political and economic challenges, panelists discuss the cultural and mental health impacts of the pandemic at a webinar hosted by the Centre for Global Health at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health (DLSPH).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted almost all aspects of life for people across the globe. Populations are grappling with unprecedented social and economic fallout, such as job losses and income precarity, loss of friends and family, and a disruption of cultural events such as graduation ceremonies, weddings and funerals. While initially being labelled as the “great equalizer” which does not discriminate based on race, gender, socio-economic status, this is clearly not the case. Researchers are increasingly highlighting the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on marginalized communities.

“COVID-19 is a huge threat which amplifies the risks associated with inequities such as poverty, race, geography” says Akwatu Khenti, Assistant Professor at DLSPH and scientist at the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). “Those who are already extremely vulnerable have their vulnerability intensified”.

This vulnerability is particularly pronounced in countries where the majority of low-income people work in the informal sector, as those who live in densely populated areas are unable to adhere to physical distancing measures and hand washing. Additionally, the consequences of losing your income has severe mental health implications. “When you don’t have a social safety net to protect you from job loss, it is a huge cause of distress. It creates a perfect storm, where you fear for your livelihood, not just the virus” added Khenti.

Loss of income and stability are not the only effects of COVID-19 causing distress. Renee Linklater, director of Shkaabe Makwa at CAMH discussed the concept of “global grief”, where loss of family, friends and community members deeply affect the whole community. “We feel connected to people we’ve never even met because they are part of this great loss that we are all experiencing”. With strict physical distancing measures put in place since March, loneliness and social isolation are particularly difficult experiences, especially for older adults who may be completely isolated. “Fortunately, at this point in time we are able to meet virtually. As we look forward, looking at different modes of connection will be really essential, as we think through how to deal with the global grief that is happening”.

The impact of the collective trauma from COVID-19 is yet to be fully understood, and already concerns regarding its long-term implications are raised. Corey McAuliffe, recent DLSPH alumni and postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia’s School of Nursing

discussed the harms of downplaying global trauma experienced on a collective scale. “I worry about the long-term implications of minimizing this trauma, especially if societies don’t respond with appropriate collective measures to support population mental health” she says. “Mental health is profoundly affected by the social conditions in which we live, which necessitates policy level interventions on both a short and long-term basis.”

What are some ways in which the global mental health crisis can be addressed, on both individual and systemic levels? Elli Weisbaum, a PhD Candidate at UofT’s Institute of Medical Science and SickKids’ Department for Neuroscience and Mental Health, highlights the way in which mindfulness can move beyond an individual basis to a broader framework. “There are many positive outcomes of mindfulness such as greater self-regulation and self-awareness, acceptance, empathy and compassion” Weisbaum says.

“By practicing mindfulness, the potential of stabilizing and self-regulating is both of individual benefit, but also collective benefit. If we are able to stabilize and self-regulate ourselves, we are not someone in distress who is rocking the boat – we become someone who is offering some stability and calm”.

Failure to recognize the collective mental health impacts during and post pandemic come at a great cost to societies and disproportionately affect marginalized communities. We must act now and attend to these consequences or pay for them later.