

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Hong Kong General Population's Mental Health

Maria Hung

School of Health Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education

Abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused a global health crisis since late 2019. This paper will present research evidence demonstrating the pandemic had imposed significant physical, psychological, and social health impacts on human beings. Lessening the adverse effects of COVID-19 on mental health is a public health priority globally and locally. The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) recommended coordinating the governmental and non-governmental departments, healthcare organizations, and educational institutions to promote "Mental Health for All". This paper will further discuss appropriate strategies and activities to facilitate and enhance people's resilience capacity, especially for those who are vulnerable or significantly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the long run, hopefully the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or future public health emergencies on mental health in the general population could be prevented or mitigated. (The paper was submitted to the Editorial Board in 2021 with figures reflecting the impact of COVID-19 pandemic at that time.)

Keywords: COVID-19, Hong Kong, mental health impact

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health

Since late 2019, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused a global health crisis and has had disastrous impacts on humans. Up to early September 2021, there have been more than 220 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 4.5 million deaths globally (World Health Organization, 2021). The pandemic has caused substantial effects on the physical health of humans (Fu et al., 2020; Galbadage et al., 2020; Nasiri et al., 2020). Also, numerous research studies that investigated mental health impacts imposed by the pandemic reported that emotional and psychological suffering could not be neglected (Luo et al., 2020; Pappa et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020; Vindegaard &

Benros, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020).

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrated that COVID-19 provoked negative emotional responses and enormous psychological impacts among general populations and healthcare professionals. For instance, Xiong et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review on the effects of COVID-19 on the psychological outcomes of the general population. They reported that high percentages of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychological distress, and stress were found in the general population of eight countries, including China, Spain, Italy, Iran, the United States, Turkey, Nepal, and Denmark. Especially those aged 40 years or below, females,

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Maria Hung, School of Health Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education, 2 Chui Ling Lane, Tseung Kwan O, New Territories, Hong Kong.
Email: syhung@cihe.edu.hk

students, or those with chronic/psychiatric illnesses, unemployment, and often being mentioned in the social media/news concerning COVID-19. The authors suggested that lessening the adverse effects of COVID-19 on mental health is a priority for public health concerns globally (Xiong et al., 2020). Another systematic review and meta-analysis of 62 studies from 17 countries found that medical professionals and the general public have a high psychological burden and that patients have considerable psychological distress (Luo et al., 2020). However, adequate medical resources support, up-to-date COVID-19 information sharing, and appropriate infection control measures were the protective factors during COVID-19. Luo et al. (2020) emphasized there was an urgent need for psychological interventions for high-risk populations with severe psychological distress.

Concerning the COVID-19 situation locally, Hong Kong has managed to reduce transmission in the coronavirus outbreak at the early stage (Kwok et al., 2020). The high possibility might be related to the successful experiences fighting against SARS in 2003 and the Human Swine Flu (H1N1) pandemic in 2009. Most Hong Kong citizens had adopted good hygiene habits after SARS and wore a face mask in public areas when having influenza (Lau et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2019). The study results reflected the participants perceived the contagiousness of H1N1 and their social responsibility to prevent influenza (Zhang et al., 2019). On the other hand, nursing professionals showed a significant professional contribution and commitment during public health emergencies (Lam & Hung, 2013). Due to insufficient local and global supply of surgical masks in the early stage of COVID-19, extensive fears of getting infection led to panic buying and over-storage (Choi et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2020).

Several studies were conducted to examine the impact of COVID-19 on local citizens' physical, psychological, and social health. An online survey investigated 1,715 respondents for their preventive behaviors, anxiety levels, and risk perceptions right after the first confirmed case in Hong Kong. The study found that the respondents had high levels of risk perception, mild anxiety, adoption of personal hygiene, avoidance of travel, and social distancing (Kwok et al., 2020).

In late April 2020, Fong and his team (2020) explored the physical, mental, and social health changes experienced by local home-bound residents. Among the 590 eligible participants, 65.3% had a higher stress level, and 29.7% had moderate to severe depression because of being home-bound, especially those aged 18-25. Those participants who were studying showed a significant difference in physical health changes when compared with those who were not. Those who were studying concerned about their study progress and learning support.

At about the same time, Choi and his team (2020) evaluated the levels of depression and anxiety of 500 citizens in Hong Kong, and the results revealed that 19%, 14%, and 25.4% had depression, anxiety, and mental health deteriorated respectively due to the persistent pandemic. Besides, the impact of COVID-19 and its association with health-related quality of life on 500 local citizens were reported. In the study, most of the participants (69.6%) had fear of contracting COVID-19, and about two-fifths (41.4%) often doubted whether they were being infected. The study results showed that both participants, including those who had fear contracting and those who were often suspected of being infected, had lower scores in different health-related quality of life domains (Choi et al., 2021).

As the Government of HKSAR, healthcare professionals, and local citizens had shown great efforts to respond and mitigate the adverse consequences of COVID-19 in the first few months, the number of confirmed cases lowered successfully for a while. However, the "third wave" rebounded in July 2020 with a sudden increase of >100 new cases/day. The Government of HKSAR announced the declaration of emergency and initiated a series of public health contingency policies again in mid-July 2020 due to the emergence of unknown infection sources of local cases (The Government of the HKSAR, 13 July 2020). Several stringent measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 were adopted, including reclosing schools, limiting social activities and group gatherings limited to 4 persons, wearing a mask policy, etc.

At the time of writing this paper, the "third wave" was the most severe pandemic wave in Hong Kong. Right after the third wave in late July

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Hong Kong General Population's Mental Health

2020, the author of this paper conducted a mixed-methods study to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Hong Kong women, including its psychological effects, its effects on their self-belief in coping, and its effects on different domains (physical, psychological, social, and environmental) of quality of life (Hung et al., 2021). Of the 417 participants, 32.2%, 42.4%, and 44.9% had stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms, respectively. The results also demonstrated significant negative correlations between emotional state and some domains of quality of life. On the other hand, there were positive correlations between general self-efficacy and quality of life domains. Furthermore, being a caregiver was associated with a significantly higher level of stress, lower general self-efficacy, poorer physical and psychological health, and a lower level of satisfaction with one's social relationships and living environment. The study results supported that the COVID-19 pandemic induced profound psychological and life impacts on Hong Kong women, especially those with a caregiver role, with lower income and low educational levels, requiring special attention and assistance from the local government, non-governmental, and healthcare organizations (Hung et al., 2021).

Mental health and resilience

Mental health is a condition of wellbeing that individuals can manage with everyday life stresses (Herman, 2012). Based on the above local evidence, the mental wellbeing of people in Hong Kong was seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone in Hong Kong might experience emotional ups and downs from daily living challenges to traumatic events with long-lasting impacts like being infected and suffered from adverse health consequences or even the death of a family member due to COVID-19. Adversity or crisis affects individuals differently, it may initiate stress, intense emotions, or painful experience in the person.

According to Cummins and Wooden (2014), the concept of subjective wellbeing homeostasis and personal resilience is significant to help the individual to recover from and adjust to the challenges during a crisis more quickly. Resilience means an individual's ability to handle and

overcome stresses or life crises (Herman, 2012). It is a positive adaptation process in responding to an adverse situation, e.g., critical health issues (American Psychological Association (APA), 2012). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, different organizations in Hong Kong, including governmental, non-governmental, social, and healthcare organizations, have conducted activities for various populations to mitigate the negative health impacts caused by COVID-19. The Government of HKSAR is recommended to coordinate the governmental and non-governmental departments, healthcare organizations, and educational institutions to promote 'Mental Health for All' to benefit the general public in the Hong Kong society. It is important to establish appropriate strategies and activities to facilitate and enhance citizens' resilience capacity, especially those who are vulnerable or significantly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increase resilience capacity

The APA (2012) recommended four essential components to increase resilience capacity, including 'connection, wellness, healthy thinking, and meaning.' That is, to connect with 'trustworthy and compassionate individuals' who could support the person during hardship, and to promote a healthy lifestyle and foster mental wellness through regular exercise, sufficient sleep, adequate hydration and nutrition, practicing mindfulness, etc. Further, to adopt healthy and positive thinking in responding to adversity and change. Lastly, to be proactive in solving the problems in life and moving forward to achieving or accomplishing the goals (APA, 2012). Besides, Herman (2012) suggested that practical activities or interventions should emphasize '*self-efficacy and community participation*' to promote mental health and resilience after a crisis. Thus, activities that enhance resilience capacity, self-efficacy, and individuals' psychological and physical wellbeing could be considered for local citizens, such as Psychological First Aid, Mental Health First Aid, Laughter Yoga, or Mindfulness training. In addition, it is recommended to organize flexible modes of activities, for instance, online/web-based workshops or seminars and small-group/individual face-to-face training to provide psychological support and wellbeing to local citizens. Appropriate healthcare

professionals could be involved consultations and follow-up actions, especially for those severely affected by the pandemic. In the long run, through the aforementioned activities, hopefully, the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or future public health emergencies on mental health in the general population could be prevented or minimized.

摘要

冠狀病毒大流行對香港市民精神健康的影響

自2019年底以來，冠狀病毒(COVID-19)大流行已引發全球健康危機。大量研究證據顯示，大流行對人類的身體、心理和社會健康造成了重大影響。減輕冠狀病毒大流行對心理健康的不利影響，是解決全球和香港公共衛生問題的優先事項。建議香港特區政府協調政府和非政府部門、醫療機構和教育機構，推動「全民心理健康」，造福社會大眾。制定適當的策略和活動，以促進和支持香港市民的復原能力，尤其是在冠狀病毒大流行期間，容易受到或已經受到重大影響的人。從長遠來看，可以預防或減輕冠狀病毒大流行或未來突發公共衛生事件，對一般市民心理健康的負面影響。

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Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Hong Kong General Population's Mental Health

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