

A Qualitative Look at Mental Health Stressors in Response to COVID-19

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Abstract : The emergent pandemic from COVID-19 virus has forced people to adjust to major changes. These changes include all elements of family and work life and required people to engage in novel behaviors. For many people, the social norms to which they have been accustomed no longer prevail. Not surprisingly, such enormous changes in daily life have been associated with greater problems in mental health; and research regarding ways in which mental health professionals can support people is more necessary than ever before. It is often useful to assess people's reactions through surveys and utilize quantitative data to answer questions about coping strategies etc. It is also likely, however, that a host of individual factors are going to contribute to what might be considered 'good' or 'bad' coping mechanisms to a worldwide pandemic. To this end, qualitative studies—where the individual's subjective experience is highlighted—are likely to provide more vital information for mental health professionals interested in supporting the particular person in front of them. This study reports on qualitative data, where X participants were asked questions about social distancing, coping strategies, and general attitudes towards social changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Informal interviews were conducted during the months of June-July 2020. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses. Themes were identified first for each participant and then compared across different individual participants. Several findings emerged. First, all participants understood major health messages being imparted by governing bodies such as the CDC and WHO. The researchers feel this finding is important as it suggests health messages are at least being effectively communicated. Second, there was a clear trend for themes which highlighted the conflicting emotions participants felt about the changes they were expected to endure: positive and negative elements were identified, although a participant who had pre-existing conditions placed greater emphasis on the negative elements. One participant who was particularly interested in impression management also exclusively emphasized negative emotions. Third, participants who were able to reevaluate priorities—what Lazarus might call secondary appraisals—experienced social distancing as a positive rather than negative phenomenon. Finally, participants who were able to develop specific strategies—such as boundaries for work and self-care—reported themes of adjustment and contentment. Taken together, these findings suggest mental health practitioners can assist people to adjust more positively through specific techniques focusing on re-evaluation of life priorities and strategic coping skills.

Keywords : COVID-19, pandemic, phenomenology, virus

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