

Mental Health and Substance Abuse in a Pandemic of COVID-19

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Abstract

The issues surrounding mental health in this age of COVID-19 are many. There has been little discussion of an increase in substance abuse during this crisis. This article examines the issue of a lack of coping skills in many individuals that have resulted in an abuse and over-use of substances such as alcohol, drugs, recreational drugs, and toxic substances. Sadly, way too many individuals resort to substance abuse during this most difficult time for myriad reasons.

Keywords: COVID-19, Counselors, Pain, Pain Management

1. Introduction

We are approaching almost a year of individuals being on quarantine, not seeing friends, relatives, acquaintances, colleagues, being forced into online instruction, and being asked to work from home while at the same time parenting children, and coping with barking dogs during Zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings.

The vast majority of Americans were not prepared for this crisis. This is an over-generalization but no classes in mental health in the schools could have prepared us for such an event. While tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods do occur on occasion, there are often warnings and there are often interventions that follow up these events to help people cope with the devastation that has occurred.

The terms acute and chronic seem relevant here. Acute events, such as a broken arm, can be addressed and there is generally a certain time frame that one expects “recovery” or at least an improvement or amelioration of their condition. Pain is one human experience that has been examined in terms of intimacy [1] and the need for counseling [2]-[5] is a well-known psychologist who has posited that people have certain basic needs and his work is well known. However, his work did not examine basic needs in terms of what support humans need in times of crisis or war or upheaval in a society.

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Certainly, during World War II, when the British were being bombed by the Germans, the British society learned to cope with the air raids and devastation wrought by the war. Currently in America, there have been riots, looting, destruction, and most recently an invasion of the capital of the United States of America. While people may not have been directly impacted by these events, there has been an emotional toll that has impacted many across America.

Some individuals cope by simply turning off the news. Others turn to religion and pray. Sadly, others who lack coping skills turn to alcohol, pot and drugs. These individuals seem to lack the coping skills to understand the crisis and to deal with it appropriately. There are however, disagreements as to the best way to deal with a pandemic and how to cope varies from person to person. There has been little in the way of educating the general public as to how to deal with being quarantined in their homes for long periods of time and how to educate their children as to why individuals all of a sudden are wearing face masks.

As the pandemic began, individuals were forced to spend long periods of time with their significant other- wives with husbands, husbands with wives, parents with their children who were often resistant to masks, social distancing, and all the details involved with attempting to avoid COVID-19.

Routines were abruptly changed, and events such as weddings and birthdays and family gatherings were either postponed or conducted, risking the transmission of COVID-19. Medical professionals were being asked to work overtime and to work under very negative, quite scary conditions, as many newly qualified individuals were not necessarily trained to work with such a contagious disease. Physicians, nurses, Emergency Medical Technicians and related personnel were all put “on -call “and “on standby “during this pandemic and there were family stressors that resulted. Divorces did occur.

2. Positive Coping Strategies

Many individuals for whatever reason, turned to very positive coping strategies. They began to work on a project in the home, began to read again, or re-read excellent books, some individuals picked up and dusted off a musical instrument from the past, and some returned to writing a novel or at least a poem or short story. Some attempted to e-mail friends and ascertain how they were coping, others picked up the phone to check in on relatives and acquaintances. Television and movies became an option and Seinfeld marathons became popular as people sought solace in the antics of Jerry and his friends and their endeavors. New avenues of music were explored by some as Country and Western songs seemed to capture some of the grief, stress and aggravation that people were experiencing. Some individuals sought other outlets for their skills, talents and abilities. Singers and musicians appeared online and comedians worked from home to bring some fun, mirth, frivolity and happiness with their stories and jokes. Some individuals merely accepted the situation and went about their business in their own manner or fashion.

3. Negative Coping Strategies

Sadly, some individuals turned to wine, beer, and alcohol. There may have been some pre-existing disposition toward the use of these items, but the utilization became increasingly pervasive. This “negative escapism” caused strife in many families and child abuse, neglect and other negatives were seen.

Anger, exasperation, frustration were manifested as people were in a state of quarantine and had limited opportunities to engage in social events, such as bowling or a local baseball league. Mental health services became overwhelmed, and probably remain so at this time. One problem that faced the ill and infirm was procuring medical attention, and while “tele-health” enabled some to consult with their health care providers, the emotional support was not as forthcoming. There is simply no substitute for the caring hand of a nurse or physician who attempts to console the patient and alleviate their anxiety.

Turning to alcohol does not assist the client patient, but merely removes the individual from the difficulty for a brief period of time. In the case of COVID-19- one cannot remove the threat of illness nor death because the spectre of death has been all around us- on the television, newspapers and almost everyone knows someone who has been directly or indirectly. Alcoholics anonymous meetings may have been held when keeping people at social distancing,

4. The Long Term Effects

Little is known about the mass quarantine effect. Certainly, there have been isolated incidents in the past, but mass investigations using any type of standardized measure are to be forthcoming, although many have begun to theorize as to the impact of the Wuhan virus on the children, adolescents and adults of America and those around the world. Other nations have been under much more strict measures, while others have coped with minimal restrictions on their movement and freedoms.

Educationally, children have not received the same educational instruction as before the virus and some adolescents have turned to drugs and alcohol during this time period. Habits are formed in childhood and adolescence and this quarantine may have established patterns of behavior in terms of turning to drugs, pot, alcohol, and whatever else is available during this time.

5. Substance Abuse

Over the last ten years there has been much concern about oxycotin and the addictive effects of opioid like medications. Certainly, we want to prevent addiction, and in particular the addiction to opioid like drugs that are not medically prescribed and medically indicated. On the other hand, there are individuals awaiting surgery, which has been postponed due to the Covid-19 virus who are in intractable pain, and this pain is causing much misery and suffering. There are those in pain who perhaps cannot afford surgery or due to pre-existing conditions, surgery is contra-indicated or simply life threatening. These individuals have to cope as best they can with their on-going acute or chronic pain. They are the victims of perhaps an over-reaction of the medical community to this crisis.

6. Recovery

As of this writing, things are still in a state of flux. While some restaurants are re-opening, there are still restrictions. Schools are adopting a “hybrid model” of education where children receive their instruction online. It is not known how this quarantine will impact the children of our nation. Their “annual yearly progress” will be slowed and the impact on teachers and the educational system will be seen for years.

7. Summary and Conclusions

This article has cursorily reviewed some of the main issues surrounding the public health crisis that has impacted the world. Of specific note are those individuals with chronic or acute pain who are isolated and heavily impacted by the crisis. Future research will examine the long-term effects of this crisis relative to pain and opioid use.

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