

# Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health of Youth

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting nationwide lockdowns had profound effects on societies worldwide, especially on mental health. This study investigates the psychological impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on young individuals in India, a demographic known for its social and active lifestyle. The lockdown, though essential to contain the virus, disrupted daily routines, restricted social interaction, and introduced new stressors, contributing to anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among youth. Adolescents and young adults, already navigating a crucial developmental phase, faced additional challenges such as isolation, academic pressure from online learning, and uncertainty about the future. To assess these effects, an online survey was conducted targeting individuals aged 18 to 30, gathering 199 valid responses. The findings highlight the urgent need to acknowledge and address mental health concerns among young people during such crises and to implement accessible psychological

**Key Words :** Mental health of youth, COVID-19, Global disruption

## INTRODUCTION

As the number of COVID-19 cases surged globally, countries across the world implemented various measures to control the spread of the virus. In India, the second most populous country, a nationwide lockdown was enforced and extended multiple times to mitigate the risk. This lockdown had varied effects on different age groups, bringing with it several challenges. Schools and public spaces were closed, social gatherings were restricted, and the concept of social distancing became a daily norm. Though the lockdown was a necessary response to the public health crisis, it also significantly altered the social and psychological fabric of society by confining people to their homes, allowing movement only for essential needs and under strict safety protocols.

While the lockdown served a critical role in controlling the pandemic, it also had both positive and negative consequences. For some, it offered a break from routine and a chance to reconnect with family; for others, it led to silent suffering. The impact was not limited to

physical health and the economy—it deeply affected the psychosocial well-being of individuals across all demographics. Each group experienced the lockdown differently, depending on their age, lifestyle, and circumstances.

The sudden disruption in daily routines, restrictions on movement, lack of social interaction, and limited access to outdoor activities had significant consequences. Over time, what initially felt like a necessary pause became a source of stress, leading to boredom, isolation, sleep disturbances, and mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression. The fear and uncertainty brought on by the virus outbreak, combined with widespread lockdowns and economic downturns, are expected to contribute to a rise in suicide rates and mental health disorders linked to suicidal behavior. For instance, McIntyre and Lee (2020) projected an increase in suicide cases in Canada related to unemployment, estimating a rise from 418 to 2,114 cases.

Young people, in particular, were among those most affected. Known for their active lifestyles and strong

need for social connection, the youth found it especially difficult to cope with the restrictions. Deprived of opportunities to socialize, explore, and engage in new experiences, many struggled with both their physical and emotional well-being. While some adapted by finding joy in small things, others found it difficult to manage and experienced signs of mental distress. The fear of infection further contributed to anxiety and stress, impacting overall health.

This study aims to examine the psychological effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the mental health of young individuals. Mental illness does not discriminate—it can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, caste, or socioeconomic background. While the onset of most mental illnesses typically occurs by the age of 24, mental health struggles can begin at any age. Often, these issues remain invisible, misunderstood, or dismissed. In today's society, depression is still not widely recognized as a serious illness, and those affected may not receive the attention or support they need. If left unaddressed, mental health issues can deeply affect not only the individual but also their loved ones.

Adolescents, in particular, are at a vulnerable stage of development, where significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes take place. Being forced to stay indoors for prolonged periods, with limited social contact and increased restrictions, can significantly affect their mental state. Moreover, school closures added academic stress, as students had to adjust to online learning—something not all were comfortable with. Meeting assignment deadlines in this new format further compounded their anxiety.

In such stressful times, it is essential to recognize the importance of mental health and take proactive measures to safeguard it.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out by analyzing data collected through an online survey designed using Google Forms. The survey link was distributed via Gmail and WhatsApp, and participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation through a consent statement included in the form.

The target group for the survey consisted of individuals aged between 18 and 30 years. The questionnaire focused on various aspects of mental health and human behavior. A total of 220 responses were

received, out of which 199 were deemed eligible and included in the analysis, based on the specified age criteria. The data collection process was completed over a span of 15 days.

## Scoring Method:

The questionnaire provided participants with three response options:

- Not at all
- Somewhat
- Very much

To quantify the responses, the following point values were assigned:

- Not at all = 0 points
- Somewhat = 10 points
- Very much = 20 points

However, for specific questions, the scoring was reversed to account for negatively worded items:

- Not at all = 20 points
- Somewhat = 10 points
- Very much = 0 points

Based on the total scores, the participants were categorized as follows:

- Highly Affected : 0 – 150 points
- Moderately Affected : 160 – 300 points
- Least Affected : 310 points and above

## FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis that reshaped daily life in profound ways. For young individuals between the ages of 18 and 30, the psychological impact of the ensuing lockdown was particularly significant. This study sought to explore and analyse these effects, focusing on mental health challenges such as anxiety, overthinking, isolation, and disruptions in sleep patterns. The findings point to an urgent need to prioritise mental well-being alongside physical health in policy-making, institutional planning, and community awareness.

One of the most revealing outcomes of this study is the wide range of emotional responses experienced by the youth. While some individuals demonstrated resilience and found ways to adapt to the restrictions, many others exhibited signs of psychological distress. The abrupt transition from structured, socially active routines to isolated, uncertain, and largely sedentary lifestyles left a considerable number of young people struggling to cope.

This struggle was further intensified by factors such as academic stress, career uncertainty, social disconnection, and fear of the unknown.

The study revealed that a significant proportion of participants, especially females, reported being highly anxious about their future. Concerns about education, employment prospects, family responsibilities, and social stagnation were common. The uncertainty of how long the pandemic and its consequences would last contributed to chronic overthinking and, in many cases, led to disrupted sleep, including frequent nightmares. These symptoms, if left unaddressed, could evolve into long-term psychological conditions such as depression, generalised anxiety disorder, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

An important observation made through this research is that emotional resilience varies greatly among individuals. Some young people, particularly those with strong family support systems, stable economic backgrounds, or pre-existing coping mechanisms, managed to adjust to the new normal. Others, however, were less equipped to handle the emotional burden, especially those from smaller households, lower-income groups, or those already predisposed to mental health issues. These differences suggest that mental health support must be both inclusive and adaptive, recognising the unique challenges and circumstances of each individual.

The study also draws attention to the limitations of the existing mental health infrastructure in India, particularly during emergency situations like a pandemic. While physical health was given considerable focus, mental well-being remained an under-prioritised area. The pandemic highlighted the absence of accessible mental health services, especially for the youth. Many participants expressed that they had limited avenues to express their stress or seek help due to the unavailability of counseling services, lack of awareness, or social stigma.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the COVID-19 lockdown had a moderate to high psychological impact on young adults. While a majority of respondents were aware of the pandemic, its prolonged implications—both psychological and emotional—took a toll. Youth, particularly females, reported higher levels of anxiety,

overthinking, and disturbed sleep. Emotion regulation is the capacity to effectively manage one's emotional reactivity, including the conscious and unconscious use of strategies, and internal or external resources, to decrease, maintain or increase positive and negative emotions, in either an anticipatory or responsive manner (Cole *et al.*, 2004; Gross and Thompson, 2007).

The data suggests that the stressors affecting mental health during the lockdown included:

- Disruption in academic routines
- Limited physical activity
- Career and financial uncertainties
- Restricted social interactions
- Fear of infection and illness

These factors collectively contributed to psychological distress, manifesting as anxiety, insomnia, fear, and emotional fatigue. Although some participants appeared resilient, managing their mental health with minimal symptoms, others exhibited signs of significant distress.

Overthinking and fear of the future emerged as the most common psychological challenges. This reflects a deeper sense of uncertainty and a lack of control over one's life trajectory—both of which are particularly hard to manage during adolescence and early adulthood. The findings align with global reports indicating increased mental health concerns among youth during the pandemic.

People can also take proactive steps to alleviate their psychological distress. For example, engaging in regular physical activity and following a nutritious diet have been shown to be effective in reducing and preventing symptoms of depression and stress (Carek *et al.*, 2011; Molendijk *et al.*, 2018; Lassale *et al.*, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

In this context, the study acts as a clarion call for institutions, particularly educational institutions and workplaces, to take active steps towards integrating mental health support into their systems. Schools, colleges, and universities should introduce comprehensive mental wellness programs that go beyond academic counseling. These programs must include workshops on stress management, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and provide regular access to professional psychological services.

Moreover, mental health education must become an integral part of the academic curriculum. Just as physical

education teaches the importance of bodily fitness, mental health education can instill a deeper understanding of emotional well-being from a young age. Creating awareness around mental health not only empowers young people to take charge of their well-being but also helps in reducing the stigma that often prevents individuals from seeking help.

The role of the government in this domain cannot be overlooked. Policymakers must recognise mental health as a critical component of public health. Investment in mental health infrastructure, awareness campaigns, training of mental health professionals, and setting up accessible helplines or digital counseling platforms are essential steps. The pandemic has taught us that emergencies like these can strike unexpectedly, and we must be better prepared with psychological first-aid systems in place.

Additionally, the media and social platforms—which occupy a significant space in the lives of young individuals—should also act responsibly. While they played an important role in disseminating health information during the pandemic, they should also be utilised to promote positive mental health narratives, share coping strategies, and encourage open conversations about mental well-being. Influencers, celebrities, and content creators can contribute by sharing their own mental health journeys, thereby normalising seeking help.

Community-based initiatives can also be powerful tools for change. Peer support groups, youth clubs, NGOs, and volunteer-led mental health awareness drives can foster safe spaces for dialogue. These grassroots movements can reach places where institutional or government-based support may fall short, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas.

Importantly, this study also reveals that youth do not just need therapy or counseling during a crisis—they need it before, during, and after such events. Proactive mental health care should be the norm, not just a reactive measure. Just as people were encouraged to maintain hygiene and wear masks to protect physical health, similar preventive strategies should be promoted for mental hygiene, such as maintaining routines, regular exercise, meditation, limiting exposure to distressing news, and nurturing hobbies. The physical and embodied aspects of yoga practice are believed to enhance interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness, helping individuals better recognize and respond to physical signs of stress and difficult emotions. Additionally, yoga may boost

physiological health by improving the functioning of the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, and respiratory systems. In theory, these benefits of embodied practice are associated with improved cognitive, emotional, and behavioral self-regulation (Gard *et al.*, 2014).

It is also necessary to involve families in mental health discourse. Many young individuals live with their families, and in such settings, awareness among parents and guardians is crucial. When families understand the mental health needs of their young members, they are better equipped to offer the emotional support required. Workshops for parents and caregivers can thus be an effective part of a broader mental wellness strategy.

As the world begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that we do not lose sight of the lessons learned. While the lockdowns may now be behind us, the psychological scars they left behind will take time to heal. We must acknowledge that mental health is not a luxury—it is a fundamental aspect of human well-being. Young people, in particular, must be empowered, heard, and supported to navigate not only pandemics but also the ordinary stresses of modern life.

In conclusion, this research underscores the significant emotional toll that the COVID-19 lockdown had on young individuals aged 18–30. It serves not only as a documentation of their psychological challenges during a global crisis but also as a call to action. It is time to move from awareness to implementation—from identifying problems to creating solutions. The youth of today are the future of tomorrow, and investing in their mental health is not just a necessity; it is a responsibility. Through coordinated efforts from individuals, families, institutions, and governments, we can build a society that is more resilient, more compassionate, and mentally healthier.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Mental Health Education:** Schools and universities should integrate mental health awareness into their curriculum.
2. **Counseling Services:** Online and in-person counseling should be made widely accessible. Due to the restrictions and delays in face-to-face healthcare services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health support can be provided remotely through options such as online consultations and helplines (Liu *et al.*, 2020;

Pisciotta *et al.*, 2019).

3. **Peer Support Programs:** Institutions can create peer-led initiatives to promote open discussions around mental well-being.
4. **Parental Guidance:** Parents must be educated to identify signs of psychological stress and offer support without judgment.
5. **Regular Screenings:** Conducting mental health assessments periodically can help in early detection and intervention.

By implementing these strategies, we can better support the youth, not only in times of crisis but also in their everyday lives. It is relevant that measures be taken by the government, educational institutions and communities collectively to address the mental health challenges of the youth. The youth can be the torch bearers who can serve as volunteers in the local communities to spread awareness towards mental health and help address the concerns of young children, parents and the elderly to counseling services and awareness programs run by the government.

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