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The Effects of COVID-19 on Suicide

The COVID-19 pandemic was predicted, by many medical professionals, to have a negative effect on the mental health of all communities. Overall, the recent pandemic did not have a significant negative effect on suicide, but particular groups of people were affected more than others. Over the course of the last two years, COVID has caused people to develop many habits and tactics to reduce or help prevent possible suicides. The full effects the pandemic has had on mental health is still being evaluated, but there is a lot of research that has been conducted on the recent effects.

Suicide, as defined by the CDC, is “death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die.” It is the 10th leading cause of death in the nation (Products, 2021). It is not something to joke about or make fun of due to the seriousness of the matter. Suicide was predicted by many professionals in the medical field to drastically increase due to isolation, financial instability, and the removal of sports and recreational activities. In both 2019 and 2020, the national suicide rate has actually seen a decrease. Between 2018 and 2019, the suicide rate dropped by 2.1% (Changes, 2021). Between 2019 and 2020, the suicide rate dropped by 5% (Rabin, 2021). Although the suicide rates decreased nationally, there was an uprise of suicide in particular ethnic groups. American Indian/Alaska Native and non-Hispanic White populations typically have the highest suicide rates. During the pandemic, these same ethnicities saw an uptick in suicides. In addition, the African American community also saw a rise in suicide cases. The uprise in these cases is theorized to be a result of financial instability or the loss of a loved one.

The COVID-19 pandemic left the minority people groups more susceptible to death and severe illness due to the virus (Rabin, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic decreased the national suicide rate, but it increased the suicide rates of minority people groups.

The pandemic also affected the mental health of children. Stress and isolation have affected adolescents around the world in a variety of ways. The pandemic was a stressful time for people of all ages. Adolescents experienced a disruption of all of their routines. School, sports, and social interactions were all stripped from the lives of young kids. Adults experienced a change in their work lives and parenting. Many working adults lost jobs or had to adjust to working at home. “During infancy, early childhood, or even in adolescence, the central nervous system (CNS) is in a vulnerable developmental window, in which the occurrence of any stressful challenges at the time of critical periods can trigger short- and long-term physiological, cognitive, and behavioral damages” (Figueiredo, 2020). Adolescence is a critical period in the development of the brain. Adolescence is a period of deep learning. During this time, kids learn many different aspects of social cognition. School is one of the most important factors in a teenager’s life. It is a place where the community surrounds them. It gives them a social outlet. During the pandemic, school was taken away. This left a gap in many common social interactions. As a result, virtual interactions played a large part in socialization. There were both positives and negatives to this development. Social media played a vital role in preventing complete isolation. It was a way for kids to interact with others without the risk of being exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Negatively, isolation and social media showed a decrease in physical activity, an increase in screen time, irregular sleep patterns, and inappropriate diets (Figueiredo, 2020). There are still many unknowns about the long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health. One of the main concerns is the effect isolation is going to have on long-term relational

experiences. The impact quarantine has on isolation is not black-and-white. Many things differ from family to family. Family income plays a large role in the quarantine experience. Quarantine affected the lives of many young children and teens.

There are many ways to help reduce the suicidal thoughts of friends and family. Many actions are very simple to take care of yourself and the lives of others. Sleep, physical activity, a healthy diet, limiting screen time, and relaxing are all things that can reduce stress and anxiety in your own personal life. One of the easiest ways to decrease stress in your personal life is by spending time outdoors. “Nature exposure can also reduce stress during early childhood in comparison to the ones that did not have much access to similar outside stimuli” (Figueiredo, 2020). Connectivity is one of the best ways to help friends and family that are dealing with increased stress and suicidal thoughts. It is important to know the warning signs of depression or suicide, for example, openly talking about suicide, abnormal sleeping habits, or extreme mood swings. There is a five-step action plan for supporting a suicidal friend. First, ask them if they are thinking about suicide. Next, be there to help and support them. Then, keep them safe. Second to last, help them connect with a support group or system. Finally, follow up with them. This gives the friend an ongoing feeling of support, purpose, and connectivity (How, 2021). It is vital to know the warning signs, preventative measures, and simple actions to help reduce and prevent possible suicide attempts.

COVID-19 impacted the lives of many people around the world. Many speculations and predictions at the beginning of the pandemic have been proven wrong about the effects of the pandemic on suicide. Nationally, suicide rates have lowered, but they raised in some groups of people. Regardless of suicide rates, quarantine and isolation have caused stress, anxiety, and depression in adolescents. The importance of knowing and recognizing the warning signs of

suicide are vital to being able to protect friends and family that are struggling.

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