

Psychologists study mental health and social impacts of COVID-19

March 23 2020, by Sophie Armour



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Psychologists at the University of Sheffield have launched a study of the mental health and social impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic to understand how they affect the mental health and behavior of UK citizens.

A team of experts, led by Professor Richard Bentall at the University of Sheffield, are surveying 2,000 people in the U.K. now, and again in a month's time, and hope that their findings will help inform the better management of future public health crises.

They aim to measure impacts of the [epidemic](#) on people's [mental health](#), their attitudes towards others and their [political views](#), and understand how these change as the epidemic progresses through the population, and how these changes are related to appropriate changes in health-related behavior.

They want to understand how these impacts are related to exposure to infected people and beliefs about the virus and the epidemic, and will also look at how these impacts are explained by [psychological factors](#) which may make some people cope better with the epidemic than others.

The representative group of UK residents will then be asked about COVID-19 health related behaviors such as social distancing, use of masks and handwashing, to measure the extent to which people are enacting these protective behaviors.

There has been very little research on the psychological impacts of viral epidemics—but the limited data that is available suggest that such epidemics may have severe social and psychological effects, and quarantining people may affect their mental health.

The psychologists predict that exposure to COVID-19 events, such as exposure to infected people, will cause an increase in depression, anxiety, death anxiety and paranoia. They also expect reductions in people's sense of trust and control over their own lives.

Dr. Jilly Gibson-Miller, Lecturer in Health Psychology at the University

of Sheffield, said: "This is one of the first studies of the 'psychology of epidemics' during perhaps one of the biggest existential threats the world has faced this century.

"Our survey will allow us to begin to understand, in great depth, the psychological impact of this epidemic on our citizens and how this changes as the epidemic unfolds.

"We know what an important role human behavior plays in the spread of an epidemic. As a Health Psychologist, I'm particularly interested in the extent to which people are carrying out protective behaviors, such as hand-washing and social distancing, and whether they feel they have sufficient motivation, opportunity and capability to do so."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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