

A Phenomenological Exploration of Pandemic Experiences Among Individuals with a History of Depression

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ABSTRACT

Depressive disorders are a common psychiatric illness affecting 12% of adults worldwide. This disorder represents a major problem for the general health of society and is the third leading cause of disability worldwide. In addition, the prevalence of depression appears to have increased worldwide following the Covid-19 pandemic. This study aims to find out what experiences people with depression have had in the era of Corona. Methods: The present research was a qualitative study using an interpretative phenomenological method. The number of research participants was nine. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed in three stages with open, selective and central coding. Results: After reviewing and analyzing the data, five major themes, 10 secondary themes, and 19 primary themes were identified. The main themes included fear of death and illness, conscious acceptance of reality and improvement of lifestyle, the extent of communication, confusion of the social structure of the family economy and the use of coping strategies. Conclusion: The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought with it other problems such as anxiety, tension and loneliness, in addition to the impact on lifestyle, activities, habits, interests and mental health, in addition to the recurrence of the disease in depressed people.



1. Introduction

Depressive disorders are a common and debilitating psychiatric illness affecting 12% of adults worldwide, with a higher prevalence in young adults, women and older people. Depression is a major health problem for society and the third leading cause of disability worldwide. The prevalence of depression appears to have increased worldwide following the COVID-19 pandemic. The diagnosis of depression based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, is characterized by a depressed mood or loss of interest and pleasure that lasts two weeks or longer, along with other symptoms such as sleep problems, weight changes, and energy changes (Fries, 2023). Repetitive negative thinking is considered one of the overdiagnostic mechanisms of depressive disorders. Studies have shown that repetitive negative thinking, such as worry and rumination, exacerbates negative emotional symptoms and serves as a gateway to depressive disorders (Newman et al., 2023). It seems that the increase in rumination during quarantine is one of the factors that increase the recurrence of depression (Liang et al., 2023); the COVID-19 pandemic has therefore significantly affected the mental health of the population (Evin et al., 2023). Coronavirus disease first appeared in the Chinese province of Wuhan in December 2019. On March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. The WHO estimates that COVID-19 has infected more than 609 million people worldwide and caused more than 6.5 million deaths by September 21, 2022. The pandemic has created an extraordinary situation, and people around the world are suffering varying degrees of fear, depression and anxiety (Liang et al., 2023). Among the most worrying events affecting people with depression during this time seems to be the constant stream of news reports about the rising number of infections and the increasing number of severe cases and deaths (Dong et al., 2020). In addition, the spread of false information on online platforms has contributed significantly to these people feeling high levels of fear and anxiety (Corbett et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies were conducted to uncover some of the potential influencing factors for exacerbation of symptoms or recurrence of depression. As an illustration, studies have demonstrated that people below the age of 40 are more prone to exhibiting symptoms or suffering from depression. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been discovered that women are more likely to experience symptoms of depression. What is the experience of people with depression-like during the Coronavirus outbreak?

Research Methodology

Study area, design, and subjects

The research method was qualitative and phenomenological. Among the available phenomenological and qualitative methods, the interpretive phenomenological analysis method was chosen to conduct this research because the most important goal of interpretive phenomenology is to discover the audience's point of view about a phenomenon in detail. This problem guides us to focus on an interpretive point of view instead of a descriptive point of view. In this research, according to the type of research and the criteria for entering the research, nine people were selected by purposive sampling until saturation was reached. During the interview

process, none of the interviewees left the study, of which 6 were women and 3 were men. The age range of these people was between 20 and 50 years old, with an average age of 33.5, they were diagnosed with major depression according to the criteria of the DSM statistical and diagnostic book and had reported experiences of being depressed before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in the interview research

| Code | Gender | Level of education | Age | The type of interview | interview time |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Female | Master's degree | 26 | Verbal | 72 Min |
| 2 | Female | P.H.D | 34 | Online | 40 Min |
| 3 | Female | Master's degree | 28 | Online | 55 Min |
| 4 | Female | Doctor | 32 | Online | 80 Min |
| 5 | Male | Bachelors degree | 29 | Verbal | 35 Min |
| 6 | Male | Bachelors degree | 22 | Verbal | 45 Min |
| 7 | Male | P.H.D | 48 | Verbal | 60 Min |
| 8 | Female | Master's degree | 44 | Verbal | 45 Min |
| 9 | Female | Bachelor's degree | 39 | Verbal | 55 Min |

Data collection

Information was collected through semi-structured interviews and the analysis was based on the analysis of semantic constructions and its classification in the form of specific themes, nine questions were used from the questionnaires. In phenomenological interviews, it's important to remember that the information the researcher gets from the interviewee isn't just their personal view of the topic. Other things like the environment, culture, and even the interviewer can also influence the interview. Interviews were analyzed in three stages open, central and selective coding. In open coding, we looked at each line of the interviews to find the main ideas about the pandemic. Then, we arranged similar ideas into different categories. In the second step (axial)of coding, we looked at how the different categories from the first step were related. We also tried to find out what might be causing and contributing to feelings of depression during the pandemic. In the selective coding, the axial coding continued at a more abstract level and the analysis went beyond the descriptive level. At this stage, the researcher also found a series of components in the field of feeling depressed. The quality of the interviews was evaluated based on the professors' opinions. This included how many interviews there were, how good they were, and how they were analyzed.

Results

The information obtained from the investigation was divided into six themes. These were: Fear of death and illness, conscious acceptance of reality and improvement in lifestyle, amount of communication, disorganisation in the socioeconomic structure of the family, and the use of coping strategies (Table 2).

Table 2. describes five main themes and ten sub-themes

| Main themes | Sub-themes | Basic themes |
|--|--|---|
| Fear of death and disease | Pervasive anxiety and worry related to the subject | Extreme fear and anxiety of death Parental illness anxiety Demoralization Excessive anxiety Self-blame and torment of conscience Feeling of danger-desperation Disturbance in sleep |
| | Long-term physical and mental side effects | |
| | Incidence of depressive symptoms | |
| | No mourning | |
| Conscious acceptance of reality and lifestyle improvement | Knowledge and awareness of the course of the disease | Increasing awareness of the disease Fear of transmission Quarantine Distance of family members from each other |
| | Social distancing of people | |
| Communication domain | Virtual life and its effects | Feeling lonely Limitation of family and friendship relationships |
| | Acquisition of lived experiences during the pandemic | |
| | Isolation in the crowd | |
| | Self-protection | |
| Disruption of the social structure of the family economy | — | unemployment Unstable fixed income Major job closure |
| Using coping strategies | — | Trust in God and prayer Leaving the home quarantine environment Goal setting and reviewing plans |

1. Main themes

1.1. Fear of death and disease

Coronavirus and the fear of passing and contracting it have caused discouraged individuals to feel a wave of panic. The fear of passing exists in all human creatures, but in basic circumstances, the anxiety of loss becomes stronger. Patients with COVID-19 have been included with very high

levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and it appears that the level of cortisol is an indicator of the seriousness of the infection. The current widespread has not made vulnerability, confusion, and chaos in people's lives, but has moreover put them in an uncertain period of mortality, where no one is beyond any doubt of their health and security. Even though the infection is more dangerous for older than more youthful, no one is immune, and this issue stresses discouraged individuals that they may lose their loved ones or that they may be caught within the grip of passing and miss their unexperienced life and the accomplishment of their wishes and trusts. In this manner, the fear of the infection creates other themes, which we'll discuss in advance.

1.2. Pervasive anxiety and worry related to the issue of Corona

1.3. Within the time of epidemic infections such as COVID-19, the fear of infection and passing beside everyday disturbances, causes solid individuals to be included with the uneasiness of the malady. Usually damaging and can lead to mental and stretch issues in individuals. In parallel with this issue, the usage of health approaches due to the number of positive results causes negative mental results in society.

1.4. Long-term physical and mental side effects

1.5. Mental health specialists say that with the spread of the coronavirus infection, the mental and brain health of individuals enduring this malady has expanded a lot. In expansion, due to the high passing rate of this scandalous infection; Numerous individuals experience stress and anxiety indeed in case they are not contaminated with Corona. Complications such as high stress, extreme depression or excessive sleep deprivation will increase in individuals who had the foundation of these mental complications before contracting Corona. In expansion to these complications due to mental push or high brain pressure among this group of corona patients; Other physical issues may emerge in them due to mental pressure.

1.6. Incidence of depressive symptoms

In addition to the immediate risk of contracting COVID-19 and falling ill, there are other potential dangers posed by the virus. One of the most important is the impact on mental health, such as anxiety and depression. The longer the quarantine lasted, the more people who had previously suffered from depression felt sad and became depressed again.

1.7. No mourning

After the loss of a loved one, people engage in a process designed to facilitate their emotional recovery. When people do not express their emotions, this can complicate the grieving process and manifest itself in many ways.

1.8. Conscious acceptance of reality and lifestyle improvement

This dimension is one of the main themes of the research. The people of a society have a certain type of behaviour, action, way of thinking and belief that forms their lifestyle. The lifestyle of many people in age groups has changed in the post-coronavirus era; In such a way that the changes that happened in the new post-coronavirus era have caused people to experience new styles of life. In the following, we will examine the sub-themes of this theme.

2. Sub-themes

2.1. Knowledge and awareness of the course of the disease

Understanding and dealing with sickness and stress are important for your mental and social health. Developing a better understanding of your body is vital for maintaining alertness and can be especially beneficial for individuals with somatic mental disorders.

2.2 Social distancing

Rules that prevent people from getting too close to each other and help prevent the spread of COVID-19. These measures to keep people apart can prevent the spread of the virus, but not being close to loved ones can make depression worse.

2.3. Communication domain

The scope of communication is one of the main topics of this investigation. This means that after the spread of Corona, due to social distancing and the closure of schools, stores and universities, people were able to communicate very little with others in everyday life and this decrease in communication and lack of interaction affected their mood and made their emotions more negative.

2.4. Virtual life and its effects

Quarantine at home is an important factor in the development of mental disorders in humans. Boredom, low energy levels, lethargy and mild depression are among the most common symptoms caused by prolonged quarantine during the time of Corona.

2.5. Acquisition of lived experiences during the pandemic

Lifestyle is a more or less comprehensive set of functions that a person uses. These functions not only serve to satisfy his current needs but also encompass the particular narrative he holds for his identity, which summarizes all the behaviours and activities of a particular person in the course of daily life.

2.6 Isolation in the Crowd

Social isolation is defined as the absence of meaningful and stable communication or minimal contact with family and society, focusing on the weakness of interactions, bonds and relationships that objectively connect people. As a result, people are isolated when following health protocols, such as closing social gatherings.

2.7. Self-Protection

Man is born into society and lives in it. This inherent loneliness is seen as an inseparable part of social and communicative problems. To protect himself, man must endure the pressures of life and overcome problems alone.

2.8. Disruption of the socioeconomic structure of the family

Economic problems are a major issue during the pandemic. The Corona pandemic is not only a health threat, but taking preventive measures to contain the spread of the virus, such as closing unnecessary centres, could disrupt the social-economic cycle. In this situation, it is very important to understand the changed economic conditions caused by the pandemic and to cope with the new normal conditions.

2.9. Using coping strategies

Efficient coping strategies are effective during stressful events such as the coronavirus. This is

because they help people to find meaning, increase their stress tolerance, increase social support, create a vision of deep human relationships and act in a value-oriented way in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Effective coping strategies increase people's awareness of the severity of the impact of the coronavirus emergency and increase resilience and transition out of the crisis caused by the coronavirus. Coping strategies are divided into two categories. Emotion-oriented strategies refer to the efforts a person uses to process emotions and reactions related to stressful situations and activities aimed at changing the environment and thereby reducing emotional helplessness.

Discussion

The study examined the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the experiences of people suffering from depression. The disease from the coronavirus is a big problem for the whole world. It's making people sick and is a danger to everyone's health. COVID-19 is a new virus that we don't know much about where it came from. It has affected human life in many different ways (Wang, 2020). Coronaviruses are a bunch of different viruses that can make you sick with things like a cold or a serious lung infection. Coronaviruses consist of various viruses that can cause illnesses ranging from a common cold to severe respiratory infections. Coronaviruses are a group of diverse viruses that can result in illnesses such as mild colds or severe lung infections. A variety of viruses, including coronaviruses, have the potential to lead to illnesses like the common cold or serious respiratory infections (Chen et al., 2020). New studies show that many people in different communities and groups have been experiencing mental health issues like stress, anxiety and depression because of the COVID-19 crisis. Depression has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, posing a significant challenge (Zheng et al., 2021; Song et al., 2020). Depression is a mental illness that can cause a lot of different emotions and problems, like feeling sad, having low self-esteem, and not being able to do things. Depression can make it difficult for a person to do everyday things, such as being with others and working. It can affect the quality of life of those affected (Onchunga et al., 2021). Studies show that one of the most important areas that give depressive disorders a higher severity is quality of life. Quality of life is another psychological aspect of people's lives that has a wide range (Losano Moreno et al., 2020). This concept is influenced in different ways by the person's physical and mental condition, personal beliefs and social relationships. Some studies suggest that the quality of life of people, especially patients with mental disorders, including depression, is negatively affected due to the nature of the infection, the unknown routes of transmission and the fear of contracting COVID-19 (Buselli et al., 2020). In line with the research findings, it can also be argued that the pandemic experience has an impact on the intensification of symptoms in patients with depression. This is because of the pandemic experience, the intense anxiety and fear of death, the fear of the parent's illness, the weakening of morale, the feeling of excessive worry, self-reproach and anguish of conscience, the feeling of dangerousness and confusion in sleep, which are all secondary and main criteria of depressive disorders, are intensified in the affected patients. It can be assumed that the pandemic experience influences the relapse experience of depression. The coronavirus pandemic has had a destructive effect on all aspects of the individual, psychological, social and economic health of people in

society, so it has not only endangered people's general lives but has also made their daily lives very difficult. The severity of this disease and its unknown complications have caused a lot of stress and disrupted people's mental health in this century. The coronavirus crisis has changed many behaviors, attitudes and even values and has affected people's lifestyles (Fiorillo et al. 2020). The use of measures such as social distancing, and the closure of gathering places such as parks, shrines, schools, universities and the like have had consequences and have weakened the social interactions of depressed people and the lack of social support has increased the sense of isolation and loneliness in these patients. In Sood's opinion, the limitation in building social relationships can be the basis for a relapse into depression. He also found in his research that anxiety and fear cause irreparable damage to people's physiological health due to the uncertainty of this illness. This damage also includes significant psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, panic disorders and behavioral disorders. Factors causing these disorders include absence from family, loneliness, misinformation from social media, financial insecurity and loss of loved ones (Sood, 2019); the coronavirus crisis has thus created conditions that have enabled a new way of life in human societies. Restricting communication and individual interactions, closing gatherings, washing hands frequently, using masks and sanitary gloves, keeping distance from others and following other health protocols, changing society's cultural consumption patterns, changing the nature of entertainment, the closure of religious centres and sacred sites, the use of the platform of virtual space for education and visiting relatives and friends, and the reduction in travel, the reduction in physical activities, the increase in reading, increased television viewing, and many other things like these have led to many changes in people's lifestyles (Chandler, 2020). People who suffer from depression are usually not excluded from this. One of these major changes that have had a significant impact on the recurrence of the disease is the increased activity in the virtual space and the rise of internet addiction. Internet addiction leads to a greater distance of the depressed patient from the real world and to the spread of their feeling of loneliness. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the coronavirus pandemic has led to a change in lifestyle, a change in interests and ultimately the severity of symptoms of various mental illnesses in people with depression, all of which have an impact on the patient's experience of life. In terms of coping strategies used by depressed people during the pandemic, we can mention praying and asking for help from God when they are alone. It can even be said that religious attitudes help people to lead a bearable life and increase their self-esteem. Research has shown that religious attitudes can effectively reduce feelings of loneliness. Other methods people tried were leaving the home quarantine environment while adhering to health protocols, setting goals and reviewing plans. By leaving the home while adhering to health protocols, people are exposed to the possibility of receiving social communication and support, which has a great impact on the recurrence of depression during the pandemic. In terms of setting goals and planning for the future, it is to say that this work makes people divide their lives from a whole into a part, and this activity creates motivation and hope in a person because people become less optimistic when they achieve their goals, they strengthen themselves for future changes.

Conclusion

The study found that COVID-19 has affected people's daily lives, including their habits, activities and mental health. It has also exacerbated mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, stress and loneliness. The study suggests that psychologists and experts should find helpful ways to deal with these problems. It also encourages people to lead an active lifestyle by engaging in more physical activities and family interactions and showing more resilience and adaptability. The current study is qualitative and, as with other qualitative studies, its generalizability is limited.

Limitations and Suggestions

The limitations of the research include the difficult access to the research sample due to the spread of the Corona pandemic and home quarantine and the lack of use of other self-reporting tools such as questionnaires. Therefore, in the next research, it is suggested that in addition to the interview, a questionnaire is also used for the reliability and validity of the data collection tool.

Conflict of interest

No

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