Report Says Mental Health Distress Continued to Increase During COVID-19 Pandemic

A new report finds that many men and women in the United States continued to experience psychological distress, depression, and anxiety half a year into the COVID-19 pandemic. Data show that during the pandemic, almost half (42%) of participants in the study reported at least mild psychological distress and 10% of participants reported moderate-to-severe psychological distress. Individuals with pre-existing health conditions, such as cancer, were more likely to report depressive symptoms during the pandemic.

The article appearing in the journal, *Lancet Regional Health-Americas*, took a unique look at changes in psychological distress. The report, led by Corinne Leach, senior principal scientist, used data from the American Cancer Society Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3) cohort from two waves, 2018 and July- September 2020, to characterize levels of psychological distress among U.S. men and women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study also identified factors associated with increased depression and anxiety during the pandemic, including sociodemographic characteristics, stressors, and comorbid conditions associated with increased risk for poor COVID-19 outcomes. A secondary focus examined the association of these factors with longitudinal change in psychological distress. Financial stressors, such as loss of employment and reduced compensation, or work/life balance stressors, such as caregiving responsibilities, were also examined. According to the data, individuals with these types of life stressors more likely had an escalation of psychological distress during the pandemic.

The report suggests that adults are continuing to experience psychological distress beyond the initial lockdown period. The results of this and prior studies support the importance of regular mental health assessment and subsequent mental health support among those with a history of mental health issues and those who may be isolating to keep themselves safe from COVID-19 or other infections.

Results also highlight the importance of investigating the continued and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health as social distancing, a factor previously associated with depression and anxiety, continues to be promoted over a year into the pandemic and as the world slowly opens again, potentially triggering different types of anxiety as people adjust to a new normal.

“Several learning opportunities for how to improve population mental health during and after pandemics, natural disasters, or other life-altering events have been created by the COVID-19 pandemic and regular mental health assessment by healthcare professionals is needed to better provide support for those at risk of developing, or those already experiencing, anxiety and depression,” said the authors. “These data from the American Cancer Society Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3) cohort in particular will help clinicians identify populations vulnerable to persistent mental health and other long-term issues to provide earlier clinical support.”

Article: Leach CR, Rees-Punia E, Newton CC, Chantaprasopsuk S, Patel AV, Westmaas JL. Stressors and Other Pandemic-Related Predictors of Prospective Changes in Psychological Distress. *Lancet Regional Health-Americas*. doi: 10.1016/j.lana.2021.100069.