



# MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research-based recommendations for the  
general population

CENTER FOR PSYCHOTRAUMATOLOGY

Vilnius University  
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## MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

Although the coronavirus pandemic primarily posed a threat to people's physical health, both the spread of the disease and the associated limitations inevitably affected our psychological well-being as well. The COVID-19 crisis is linked to a wide range of stressors, including the threat of the virus, various life changes, uncertainty about the future, limited contacts with others, quarantine, loss of loved ones and many others (Gersons et al., 2020; Javakhishvili et al., 2020). Although anxiety or other unpleasant emotions experienced by people in such situations are very natural reactions, facing the challenges of contagious diseases' epidemics and pandemics can lead to more serious psychological problems for some people.

Researchers agree that the scale of the COVID-19 crisis in the modern world and its impact on different spheres of people's lives can lead to a wide range of stress-related difficulties and their prevalence in general population (Horesh & Brown, 2020).

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PSYCHOLOGISTS BELIEVE THAT ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS OR EVEN THE INCREASED RISK OF ADJUSTMENT DISORDER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WILL POSE SIGNIFICANT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH CHALLENGES FOR PEOPLE.

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The spread of the virus and safety measures chosen to limit it differed in countries. Although there are still relatively few studies assessing the impact of coronavirus pandemic, initial analyses in Italy, Spain, China, and elsewhere show a negative impact of the pandemic on people's psychological well-being. The studies show an increase in posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression and anxiety (González-Sanguino et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). These psychological difficulties are thought to be associated with COVID-19 related stressful experiences.

Psychologists believe that adjustment difficulties or even increased risk of adjustment disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic will pose significant psychological health challenges for people. Adjustment problems can be experienced in response to significant life events or changes, otherwise known as stressors. These adjustment problems are manifested by constant concern about the stressful situation and difficulties in adapting to changes (Kazlauskas & Quero, 2020). Previous research in Lithuania has shown that adjustment disorder is particularly associated with stressors related to work and health (Zelviene et al., 2020), areas which have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

Adapting to changes and life-threatening situations is also hampered by limitation of the conventional ways of coping with stress, influenced by safety measures taken to limit the spread of the virus. For instance, ways to relax by meeting our loved ones or engaging in leisure activities are limited. So we have to look for other, perhaps less usual, options for self-help (Horesh & Brown, 2020). As early as the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) disseminated information with recommendations on how to cope with stress more successfully. Hopefully, these usually effective ways of self-help in stressful situations will also be effective in reducing the psychological consequences of the coronavirus crisis.

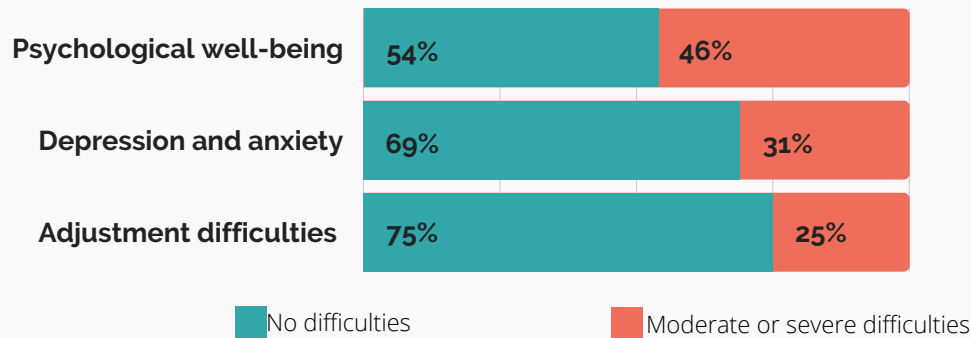
## RESULTS OF THE STUDY CONDUCTED IN LITHUANIA



In the summer of 2020, psychologists from the Center for Psychotraumatology at Vilnius University launched a study to investigate the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania. This study aimed to find out how the coronavirus crisis affected the well-being of people in Lithuania and how to help them more effectively. This study is a part of the study initiated by the European Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ESTSS). ESTSS initiated a pan-European study on the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lotzin et al., 2020), conducted in ten countries – Lithuania, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Austria, Croatia, Sakartvelo and the Netherlands. We present a summary of the results of a study conducted in Lithuania. 670 adults participated in the study.



## MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES DURING THE PANDEMIC Results from the Lithuanian study



VU Center for Psychotraumatology study findings

Research shows that respondents were affected by various stressors related to the pandemic. 60% of the participants were moderately or strongly affected by the uncertainty about the risks and duration of the coronavirus pandemic. 37% were afraid of getting infected with the coronavirus, even more – 56% were afraid that their loved ones or relatives could get infected with the virus. Participants were also affected by changes in their everyday life that were made to prevent the spread of COVID-19. 49% of respondents were moderately or strongly affected by the limited ability to meet and spend time with their loved ones or relatives. 23% of people were affected by income loss or a threat of income loss. Many participants claimed that the pandemic had negative consequences for their emotional well-being as well: 51% of respondents experienced stronger anxiety, 38% - sadness, 29% felt moderately or very lonely.

The study also shows that up to 46% of the participants described their psychological well-being as poor. 24,6% of people were at risk for adjustment disorder. Results of an earlier study conducted in Lithuania showed that the rates of adjustment difficulties were lower by 8% (16,5%) (Zelviene et al., 2020). It is likely that various difficulties related to the pandemic determined stronger reactions to stressful situations and therefore worsened peoples' well-being. Besides that, 31% of participants also experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety. 21% of respondents were at risk for suicide, for 22% of them the risk was high.

Research indicates that those who made more effort to maintain a healthy lifestyle (for instance, exercised and ate healthy food), maintain a daily routine and engage in enjoyable activities experienced less anxiety. While participants who spent more time searching for information about pandemic reported stronger anxiety. Also, respondents who communicated online with their friends, loved ones, or relatives reported less loneliness.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GENERAL POPULATION. HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC?

- 1. Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle and daily routine.** Even if you have to spend more time at home, try to keep your daily routine, eat regularly and engage in physical activities.
- 2. Engage in enjoyable activities.** It will help to relax and provide you with pleasant emotions.
- 3. Communicate.** If there are no other options, maintain your social networks online. You can also get involved in local community initiatives that help those in need.
- 4. Concentrate on what you can change.** In situations like this, when we can't control everything, we can experience strong anxiety or helplessness. It is important to recognize it and concentrate on what we can change and control. For instance, we can control how we protect ourselves from the virus, how we try to keep in touch with others, etc.
- 5. Limit the amount of information about the spread COVID-19 and its threats.** Seek information updates only from reliable sources. Choose specific times during the day when you check for new information. This will help you to properly understand the situation, provide a feeling of safety and sustain hope.
- 6. Try psychological help and emotional support services that are available for free.** We suggest looking for a mental health app in your language or calling an emotional-support helpline.
- 7. If you are not feeling well for a longer period of time, seek professional psychological help.** Mental health specialists will help you to better understand your emotions and will provide you with recommendations for further help. The earlier your problems are recognised, the easier and faster you can return to a better emotional state.
- 8. If you are thinking about suicide, immediately reach out for help from a specialist.** Mental health professionals will help you to better understand your well-being, reduce anxiety and find alternative ways to solve your problems. You can find information in English about suicide prevention in Lithuania [here](#).



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