



## Mental Health Issues Caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic on Individuals within Selected Families in Polokwane, South Africa

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### **Abstract**

Several studies show that during pandemics people face mental health issues that are caused by many factors such as fear of death. South Africa experienced the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic wherein mental health issues associated with the pandemic were envisaged. It is from this background that the study explored the mental health issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals within selected families in Polokwane, South Africa. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach wherein a case study design was used. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews wherein convenient and Snowball sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings of the study show that families experienced, fear, emotional and behavioural changes. Findings also reveal that mental health issues were experienced by individuals who were in quarantine and isolation. Conclusions and recommendations are also provided in this study.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19; Family; Mental Health; South Africa*

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns for mental health issues that surfaced during and will still surface after the pandemic. Several studies revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on the mental health of people globally and increase cases of issues such as depression and suicide (Li, Yang, Liu, Zhao, Zhang, Zhang, Cheung & Xiang, 2020; Yao, Chen, & Xu, 2020). Rubin and Wessely (2020) avow that the fear of the unknown circumstances that may surface from the COVID-19 pandemic led to anxiety in healthy individuals as well as those with pre-existing mental health conditions. Several studies show that during pandemics people develop depressions, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorders (Hall, Hobfoll, Palmieri, Canetti-Nisim, Shapira, Johnson & Galea, 2008; Sim, Chan, Chong, Chua & Soon, 2010; Müller, 2014). Thus, it can be noted that mental health issues were not experienced for the first time during the pandemic as it is usual for individuals to experience mental health issues during natural

disasters as stated by Maunder, Leszcz, Savage, Adam, Peladeau, Romano, Rose and Schulman (2008) and Baxter, Scott, Ferrari, Norman, Vos, and Whiteford (2014) who posit that data from previous pandemics and endemics shows that psychological distress and mental health issues rise during and after pandemics. Furthermore, it is averred that the pandemic's impacts on mental health may persist longer than the physical health effects (Gunnell, Appleby, Arensman, Hawton, John, Kapur, Khan, O'Connor & Pirkis, 2020). It is from this background that the study explored mental health issues caused by the COVID-19 on individuals within selected families in Polokwane, South Africa.

Research methodology gives research legitimacy and provides scientifically sound findings. According to Goundar (2012) research methodology refers to the systematic, specific procedures and techniques used by researchers to identify, select, process, and analyze information about a specific topic. This study has followed a qualitative approach wherein a case study design was used to explore COVID-19 resilience strategies of selected families in Polokwane. Data in this study was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically through the help of Nvivo software for thematic formulation. The study involved individuals within families that were affected by COVID-19 in Polokwane. Snowball sampling technique was used because the researchers knew few COVID-19 affected families which identified more Families. Convenient/availability sampling technique was also used in the study. The researcher sampled eight (8) COVID-19 affected families to participate in this study. Quality criteria and ethical issues were taken into consideration.

## ***Literature Review***

### **COVID-19 and Mental Health in South Africa**

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Naidu (2020) predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to mental health issues that may negatively affect the behavior of many individuals. This was the case as the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on mental health of individuals and families across the globe as averred by Pillay and Barnes (2020). A South African Study conducted in Soweto revealed that South Africans who had childhood traumas and other adversities were at a higher risk of facing mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim & Su, 2020). Another study conducted in a similar location, found that adults with traumatic childhood history experienced stress and showed depressive symptoms because of fear of COVID-19 infection (Kim, Nyengerai & Mendenhall, 2022). It can be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of many individuals in South Africa. In addition, Ansari and Yousefabad (2020) posit that the changes that were brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on families such as changes in family daily activities increased anxiety and stress through prolonged quarantine, resulting in the deterioration of the family's mental health. The South African government-imposed restrictions and regulations which affected both the mental health and family functioning of some families. Studies show that restrictions of interaction and mobility of the population, curfews, travel restrictions-both national and international as well as business activity restrictions and the cancellation of events and gatherings affected the family functioning of some families and mental health of some citizens in South Africa (Pillai, Motloba, Motaung, Ozougwu, Ikalafeng, Marinda, Lukhele & Basu, 2020; Adebisi, Roman, Chinyakata & Balogun, 2021). Pillay and Barnes (2020) aver that access to mental health care services during the pandemic was difficult due to limitations and fear of contact consultations. This is affirmed by Govender (2020) who avows that some NGOs providing health support and services in different countries including South Africa reported a decrease in mental health visits as a result of lockdown in one of their facilities in Tshwane. Thus, it can be noted that the restrictions such as lockdown prevented some individuals to get mental health care services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Coping Theory**

This theory was found by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. The underlying view of this theory is to offer lenses to understand how people cope with stressful situations by analysing the strength and weakness of individuals and families (Biggs, Brough & Drummond, 2017). Biggs, Brough and Drummond further described coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts of managing specific external and internal demands that are brought by stressful events and conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors such as finances for purchasing of medication for example have an influence on individuals and their families as they attempt to cope with natural disasters. According to Lazarus (2020) when the environment requires people to deal with its demand or challenges such as natural disasters, cognitive and behavioural efforts are required to respond effectively. The coping theory was relevant for the study due to its focus on how people cope and respond to stressful situations. The different factors that affect different family members in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic were understood through the guidance and lenses of this theory. Coyne and Racioppo (2000) state that understanding of the coping process is necessary for developing effective coping strategies during difficult situations. The theory allowed the researcher to appraise the mental health issues that were that were faced by families in Polokwane.

## **Methodology**

### **Findings and Discussions**

Three themes emerged from the question on mental health issues in the families, namely, emotional and behavioural changes, Quarantine, Isolation, and mental health as well as fear and mental.

#### **Theme 1: Emotional and Behavioural Changes**

A number of respondents highlighted changes in their emotions and behaviours which were caused by the idea of having to live in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study are in line with Pedrosa, Bitencourt, Fróes, Cazumbá, Campos, de Brito and Simões e Silva (2020) who found that during the COVID-19 pandemic people who got affected by emotional, behavioural and mental issues were numerous. This highlights the impact of pandemics on the emotional and behavioural state of individuals and families. Studies also show that several individuals have experienced feelings of worry, anger and frustration due to the mental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahmadi & Ramezani, 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Sher, 2020), thus it evident that the findings of this study are in line with the findings of other studies. This is what one of the respondents said:

*"I had to change how I live my life; i tried to avoid spending time with my family. I preferred being in my bedroom than to be with my family. I avoided them due to fear of infection".*

Other respondents said:

*"My mother would always prefer sleeping than being with us in the dining room like before. This also made me to live in worries because seeing my mother like that stressed me".*

*"Mentally I was disturbed; I had a lot of stress, and my emotions were all over. I really had a tough time. I lived with anxiety and fear; I was worried about my well-being, you can imagine having to wake up to statistics of positive cases and those who have lost their lives. Now you start asking yourself questions such as am I next or what. I almost got depressed because seating all day worrying about what damage the COVID-19 can do to my life".*

It can be deduced from the findings that some individuals experienced emotional and behavioural changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it cannot be concluded from the findings of this study that everyone experienced emotional and behavioural changes because of COVID-19. It can only be deduced that changes in emotions and behaviour were observed and reported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some respondents have also revealed that they were always worried about their well-being. These findings are similar to the findings of the study that was conducted by Hao, Tan, Jiang, Zhang, Zhao, Zou, Hu, Luo, Jiang, McIntyre and Tran (2020) who found that many individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic had worries about their well-being which led some of them to have severe anger and suicidal thoughts. It should not be noted that people who live in worries are likely to get stressed and compromise their health. This is supported by Dubey, Biswas, Ghosh, Chatterjee, Dubey, Chatterjee, Lahiri and Lavie (2020) who aver that people who constantly engage in feelings of worry are likely to be more prone to stress. This places an emphasis on the disadvantage of living in worries, which also causes people to experience emotional issues and behavioural changes.

## Theme 2: Quarantine, Isolation, and Mental Health

Respondents have reported being in quarantine and isolation as a contributor to mental health issues. Some respondents indicated that having restrictions or being away from their loved ones caused mental health issues to them. It could be that people experienced mental health problems as a result of worrying too much and not being able to get support from their family members. Some reported fear of death as one of the challenges they have faced during quarantine and isolation period. According to Jain, Bodicherla, Raza and Sahu (2020) people in quarantine and isolation facilities face mental health issues as a result of restricted access to support. Some respondents have indicated that their mental health issues worsened during quarantine and isolation which also restricted their access and support from their family members. According to Bäuerle, Teufel, Musche, Weismüller, Kohler, Hetkamp, Dörrie, Schweda and Skoda (2020), during pandemic restrictions such as isolation foster loneliness in people's lives which has negative effects on their mental health. In addition, COVID-19 pandemic has multi-dimensional impact on the physical, mental, social, and emotional wellbeing of individuals and families (Kontoangelos, Economou & Papageorgiou, 2020). Some respondents said that:

*“Being in isolation can affect your mental health in a bad way; I was strong but at the same time stressed and worried. I would at times overthink, asking myself if I will defeat the virus or become a statistic. Having to observe the statistics every day, seeing more people getting infected and losing their lives instilled fear to me”.*

*“It was an unpleasant time for me to isolate, what bothered me more was the fact that I could not be in contact with my loved ones. You can imagine being away from your family, your number one source of support. It was very difficult for me. What made it worse was the fact that I was scared of succumbing to the virus and leaving my children with no parent”.*

In addition, other respondents said that:

*“After I have been told to isolate I started worrying and having many thoughts. I was worried about my well-being; I developed fear of succumbing to the virus. I did not have peace of mind. I was always thinking of death now and then”.*

*“I was already having my own mental health issues, being in isolation really worsened the situation. I feel like it made me face more mental health issues such as stress. I was stressed by being away from the things and people that I love as well as losing my life to the virus.”*

The findings above show that being in quarantine and isolation can be a source of mental health issues. This is in line with Jain, Bodicherla, Raza and Sahu (2020) who aver that the impact of isolation can be severe in people who are already having mental illnesses. However, this does not suggest that

people who are not having mental illnesses will not be prone to mental health issues after being quarantined or isolated. It should be noted that being in isolation or quarantine restrict people from getting support from their families as it is important for individuals and families to socialize and connect in order to maintain a good mental wellbeing (Cornwell & Laumann, 2015). People who are having mental illnesses are advised to socialize as a part of therapy in most of the psychiatric illnesses. However, as a result of the COVID-19 regulations, the South African government imposed regulations such as social distancing, quarantine, and isolation as the most effective strategies for curbing the spread of the virus. This meant that people who can socialize effectively are those who have access to technology, such as connecting with family members through video-calls and social media platforms. This is in line with Bergdall, Kraft, Andes, HatfieldTimajchy and Hock-Long (2012) who aver that communication technologies such as cell phones, the internet, and social networking sites have a crucial role in people's lives of offering tools for establishing and maintaining relationships where a contact communication cannot be possible.

### Theme 3: Fear and Mental Health

Some respondents reported that they have been living in fear as a result of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported that they had fear for their lives and those of their family members. The findings are in line with Ornell, Schuch, Sordi and Kessler (2020) who posit that people started being afraid of death, social isolation, and family organization as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents also indicated that their fear was fueled by the impact of the COVID-19 on human lives and the daily statistics of the COVID-19 cases. During previous global pandemics, it was found that individuals and families experienced pandemic fear and increased symptoms of stress, anxiety and panic attacks which was also the case with the COVID-19 pandemic which made people to feel helpless and experience fear of contracting the virus and dying (Dymecka, Gerymski & Machnik-Czerwik, 2021). The respondents said that:

*“My family members started living in isolation because of the fear of contracting the virus from one another, more especially from my mother who works at the hospital. Before COVID we were a happy family, after the arrival of the pandemic, we started to live in fear, the fear increased as more positive and death cases of COVID-19 were reported”.*

*“You know the minute a person gets frustrated and anxious, they are likely to get stressed. I was stressed. What disturbed my mental health is having to live in fear of succumbing to the virus or waking up to the reality of one of my family members catching or succumbing to COVID-19”.*

In addition, another respondent echoed that:

*“The day I heard about COVID-19, I thought is not something serious, until I started seeing statistics of people catching it, some losing their lives because of it. Honestly speaking the statistics shocked me and made me to live in fear of catching or succumbing to the virus.”*

The findings above show that COVID-19 caused fear in the lives of many individuals. Fear can bring destructive outcomes in the lives of individuals and families. This is supported by Pedrosa, Bitencourt, Fróes, Cazumbá, Campos, de Brito and Simões Silva (2020) who state that fear has several destructive outcomes such making people to be suicidal. Respondents have indicated that a number of factors such as fear of infection brought fear in their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mamun and Ullah (2020) and Sher (2020), during the COVID-19 pandemic there have been numerous reports of worries of the mental health impact of the pandemic and suicidal behavior in individuals due to fear-related issues. The researcher is of the view that another factor that might have increased or brought fear in people's lives could be the fact that cases of COVID-19 were broadcasted all over the media platforms. This is supported by Dymecka, Gerymski and Machnik-Czerwik (2021) who posit that the way COVID-19 has been widely talked about in the media caused high levels of fear and compensatory

behaviour. Ahuja, Banerjee, Chaudhary, and Gidwani (2021) state that fear of COVID-19 is positively associated with negative emotions and that give rise to concerns about the risk of infection increase anxiety and stress. However, during the pandemic, stress is not just about the fear of getting infected, it is also experienced as a result of isolation, lifestyle changes, job loss and lack of social contact (Dymecka, Gerymski & Machnik-Czerwik, 2021).

### **Conclusions**

Mental health issues have been troubling many individuals in South Africa way before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the mental health problems in South Africa. It can be deduced from the findings that mental health problems were experienced as a result of the fear of death, quarantine and isolation which caused emotional and behavioural changes in some individuals within the selected families. Thus, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of individuals cannot be overlooked. The following recommendations are provided by this study:

- There should be awareness and responsive programmes for responding to mental health issues that are faced by individuals during pandemics and natural disasters in South Africa.
- The South African government should employ and deploy more social workers to help with mental health issues before, during and after natural disasters.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study is available on request from the corresponding author.

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