

# COVID-19 and Anxiety: The Psychological Effects of the Pandemic

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**Abstract.** According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a pandemic is a large-scale epidemic that affects millions of people in many countries and sometimes spreads worldwide. Pandemics pose a threat to health with an unknown nature, highly contagious characteristics, and symptoms. Restrictive measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus have both physical and mental effects on individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people's lives globally across many areas, including psychological, economic, and health aspects. In general, it is believed that the transition to a new lifestyle, the presence of restrictions, changes in routines, and uncertainties about health and the future can cause anxiety in individuals. In this context, a review of studies in the relevant literature shows that generalized anxiety disorder has increased during the pandemic. In addition, the study addresses a current problem and is considered important for future research, given the limited number of studies in this area. It is known that both the impact of the disease on human health and the limitations and consequences of pandemic measures have caused individuals to experience a difficult period in terms of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article presents the psychological symptoms of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in humans and analyzes scientific studies. We hope that the article will explain the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and anxiety disorders and show how to deal with such situations.

**Keywords:** generalized anxiety disorder, fear of COVID-19, mental health, pandemic, health anxiety cognitive flexibility

## Introduction

A pandemic is the spread of an infectious disease from a specific region to multiple continents and poses a threat to many people (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Pandemics have been a global problem since the dawn of humanity. As a global crisis, pandemics affect international systems economically, culturally, socially, and politically. The virus known as “Covid-19,” which has spread to many parts of the world, led the World Health Organization to declare a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2021). Taylor (2019) states that one of the vulnerability factors that makes individuals experience high levels of anxiety during a pandemic is health anxiety (Taylor, 2019). Supporting this, research has shown that health anxiety can increase the risk of generalized anxiety disorder during previous pandemics (Rubin et al., 2009). It is thought that cognitive flexibility may be a protective factor against generalized anxiety disorder during a pandemic.

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Cognitive flexibility encompasses characteristics such as adapting to different circumstances, adjusting information-processing strategies in the face of unexpected situations, and engaging in multifaceted thinking (Canas et al., 2003). Research has found that cognitive flexibility is important for health, well-being, and adaptation, and may benefit individuals facing stressors beyond their control (Arnau et al., 2007). In a pandemic, cognitive flexibility helps people reframe situations and reduce risks. Another possible predictor of generalized anxiety disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic is fear of COVID-19, defined as reactions triggered by intense fear of contracting the virus (Arora et al., 2020). Factors contributing to this fear include lack of knowledge about the disease, limited treatments and vaccines, the risk of death, and uncertainty over when the pandemic will end.

## Methods

Based on the existing literature, this study will examine the relationships between generalized anxiety disorder, health anxiety, COVID-19 fear, and cognitive flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we will examine the extent to which health anxiety predicts generalized anxiety disorder, COVID-19 fear, and cognitive flexibility. A study investigating the psychological distress caused by the pandemic found that areas with fewer restrictions and quarantines had lower prevalence of COVID-19 fear, stress, anxiety, and substance use than other regions (Gritsenko et al. 2020). Research also suggests that COVID-19 fear may be associated with various psychopathologies, such as anxiety and mood disorders (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2020).

Anxiety is a feeling of tension that arises from the thought that “something bad will happen” and is usually caused by the thought that something bad will happen. Anxiety is one of the symptoms that most people may experience at some point in their lives (Buelow, 2020). Semantically, the word “anxiety” does not fully correspond to the word “anxiety,” and it is suggested that the word “distress” be used instead. This is because it can more clearly indicate the severity of anxiety experienced clinically. In this article, the term “anxiety”, which is often used in the literature, is preferred. Anxiety has been a concept that has attracted the attention of many theorists. Anxiety is a part of human life and is present in the individual from birth to death. Neurotic anxiety arises as a result of the loss of meaning in life or its own fragmentation. Anxiety is defined as a concept that is future-oriented but arises in the present. The main factor driving a person to worry is uncertainty about the future. Anxiety can also be considered a kind of reaction. This reaction arises in response to threats that negatively affect the individual's internal balance. In this way, the individual seeks a new balance. According to the existentialist approach, anxiety is the individual's awareness of the reality of absence rather than of presence. Freud (1895) states that anxiety is the product of instinctual needs and that tension and anxiety arise in the individual because these instincts are unacceptable, and as a result, defense mechanisms such as repression are activated. He also drew attention to sexual desires and negative experiences in childhood in the formation of anxiety. Generalized anxiety disorder is a diagnosis characterized by chronic and persistent anxiety. It consists of a set of various psychological and physiological symptoms that accompany multidimensional anxiety. For this diagnosis, symptoms must persist for at least 6 months (Stein & Sareen, 2015). Generalized anxiety disorder is a disorder that is not specific to a specific object, situation, or thought, and presents itself with both psychological and physiological symptoms in the individual.

The impact of generalized anxiety disorder on a person can be observed in various areas, such as cognitive, physical, and functional. As with all anxiety disorders, the main point of generalized anxiety disorder is the presence of irrational and involuntary thoughts (Lee et al., 2010). These thoughts can cover a variety of topics, from family and financial situations to relationships, work, and health.

Building on this, intolerance of uncertainty is the tendency to interpret uncertain situations as stressful and negative. This leads to chronic anxiety in individuals diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (Koerner & Dugas, 2006).

Towards the end of 2019, a rapid increase in pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, attracted attention (Wu et al., 2020). Researchers identified a new coronavirus, which they called 2019-nCoV, as the cause of the increase in pneumonia cases. This new virus has also been identified as SARS-CoV-2 due to its similarity to SARS. The virus is named corona, which means crown in Latin, because the rod-shaped glycoprotein structures surrounding it resemble a crown (Lai and Cavanagh, 1997). Commonly referred to as COVID-19 (Co: corona, Vi: virus, D: disease), the most common symptoms include shortness of breath, fever, joint pain, fatigue, cough, and loss of smell or taste (WHO, 2020). The incubation period ranges from 2 to 14 days. The virus can be transmitted from infected individuals through droplets or contact with contaminated surfaces (Chagla et al., 2020). COVID-19, which has spread worldwide, was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020. The WHO warns that hand hygiene, avoiding crowded environments, maintaining social distancing, and wearing masks are essential to prevent the spread of the virus (WHO, 2020). The increasing number of cases and deaths due to COVID-19 has prompted governments to take a number of precautionary measures to prevent the spread. In many countries, measures such as quarantine, mandatory mask wearing, school closures, work-from-home orders for private businesses and government agencies, and takeout services for restaurants and cafes have been implemented. Epidemics, beyond their biological and physiological effects, leave lasting economic, social, political, and psychological scars on society. Historical examples demonstrate that epidemics disrupt states and economic systems. The mental health impact of pandemics is often more persistent and widespread than their physical effects (Shigemura et al., 2020). The negative atmosphere caused by pandemics can contribute to various psychiatric illnesses. Research indicates that the negative mental health effects of pandemics often persist beyond the acute phase (Douglas et al., 2009). Anxiety disorders, OCD, mood, and sleep disorders may increase during pandemics. Mak et al. (2009) report that the most common psychiatric disorders that emerged in the long term after the SARS pandemic were PTSD, depression, sleep disorders, and anxiety disorders. Similar to past pandemics, a study of individuals exposed to COVID-19 found that individuals experienced high levels of panic, fear, and anxiety (Smith et al., 2020). During the pandemic, individuals experienced fear and anxiety even when they had a cold or the flu, fearing that they would get COVID-19.

Furthermore, when examining people's reactions to the global crisis, the following were common fears: fear of contracting the virus and dying, fear of quarantine, feeling lonely and helpless, fear of being separated from loved ones due to quarantine, fear of experiencing economic hardship and losing their job due to the pandemic, and reluctance to seek medical attention.

The pandemic also negatively affects children and adolescents. School closures, limited socialization, isolation from peers, fear of illness, inadequate housing in crowded families, and the indirect impact of economic problems all contribute to the risk of negative emotions in both children and adolescents.

One of the most important measures in the fight against COVID-19 is social isolation. Those who test positive are isolated from their relatives and environment, and those suspected of infection are placed in a 14-day home quarantine. During this difficult process, the lack of social support, especially for the sick, can increase feelings of loneliness and cause anxiety. In addition, the closure of gathering places such as cinemas, theaters, and places of worship due to increased infection risk can limit individuals' socialization, leading to isolation and withdrawal from society. It has been found that these factors are associated with greater anxiety and stress (Tzur et al., 2020).

## Results

COVID-19 is causing two types of health problems. First, the physical health problems caused directly by the virus, and second, the increase in mental health disorders such as anxiety, panic, panic attacks, generalized anxiety disorder, and depression that have come with the pandemic. COVID-19 is not only a physical health crisis, but also a mental and psychological health emergency. Infectious diseases not only threaten people's physical health, but also harm the psychological health of the entire population, regardless of whether they are infected or not. In the early stages of the pandemic, more attention was paid to the physical illnesses caused by the virus, and the effects on mental and psychological health were not emphasized. However, this is likely to continue even after the pandemic is over, when the psychological effects of the disease will likely persist for months or even years after normal life returns. The COVID-19 pandemic, with the concept of a "new normal", may affect people's lives on a global scale and in many areas such as psychology, economics and health.

Many people may face problems while trying to adapt to the changing living conditions. With the advent of the new normal, people have to make radical changes in their lives, and this situation causes individuals to strive to find a "new balance". However, the existence of a life-threatening virus can cause people to question their values in life, and facing the reality of death can create tension in individuals. The impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on people's psychology includes individual differences. The traumatic effects of stress during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens people's lives and is global in scope, may vary depending on people's socio-cultural characteristics, socio-economic status, mental health status and personality characteristics. In general, it is thought that situations such as new order, restrictions, changes in routines, and health-related uncertainties can cause anxiety in individuals. The main strategy implemented to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus was to physically separate people, i.e. isolate them. Although this measure has a protective effect against the pandemic, it can weaken social ties, posing a threat to mental health. Socialization is argued to be a vital biological need for psychological well-being, mental health, and survival. Therefore, the lack of social interaction during quarantine negatively impacts psychological and emotional well-being. In this context, when examining the relevant literature, it appears that widespread anxiety, especially during the pandemic, has increased.

Considering all these findings, it is believed that examining studies predicting generalized anxiety disorder in a pandemic atmosphere, in particular, determining the extent of the direct effect of COVID-19 fear on generalized anxiety disorder, and determining the content of interventions for increased anxiety during the pandemic, could contribute to the literature. In addition, the study addresses a current problem and, given the limited research on generalized anxiety disorder, health anxiety, cognitive flexibility, and COVID-19 fear, it is thought that it could contribute to the field and serve as a basis for future research.

## Discussion

Major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can erode people's sense of security. This erosion is primarily due to unanswered questions about when the pandemic will end and whether there will be a cure, as well as concerns about potential social and economic crises. Trauma arises as individuals are confronted with death and illness, often resulting in deteriorating mental health. Factors such as social isolation, prolonged stay-at-home orders, and constant exposure to information can amplify these negative effects. Additional stressors—including insufficient medical care, lack of or misleading information, infection, and financial losses—increase psychological impact. Increased time at home, new symptoms, exposure to more cases, and worsening illness can trigger mental health issues like depression, acute stress disorder, PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and psychosis. The number and severity of negative events vary by socioeconomic level, with main

challenges more closely tied to money (job and income loss) and basic needs (access to food and medicine) than to direct disease experience.

Given the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, negative moods and thoughts were widespread. Individuals feared the world as they knew it would change, and the possibility of a very bleak near future. In addition, those who were sick or in home quarantine due to exposure experienced intense thoughts about health and death. People were on high alert and avoided situations related to COVID-19, as authorities encouraged them to. However, despite the extraordinary scale of the pandemic's impact, it is recommended that behavioral change be guided by common sense. This may work in some cases, but it is not enough to educate the public about public health issues without scientists' involvement. The proven direct and indirect psychological and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are widespread and may continue to impact mental health in the future. Innovative/creative research is needed to reduce mental health risks, achieve success, and inform interventions in pandemic settings.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can be used to explore this. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a behavioral approach, is grounded in the psychological flexibility model. The model of psychological flexibility is informed by six interrelated processes: cognitive awareness, acceptance, present-moment engagement, contextual self-awareness, values, and value-oriented actions. One of these six processes, acceptance, is the ongoing process of actively accepting what is remembered and felt in the present moment, even if it causes psychological pain, without trying to change its frequency or form. When a person is unable to develop the ability to accept, they may exhibit avoidance behavior. Avoidance behavior refers to behaviors a person engages in to reduce and manage negative and painful emotions, as well as the thoughts, memories, and bodily sensations associated with them. Psychological flexibility is not a specific condition or set of symptoms. Instead, it is a trans-diagnostic process that supports mental health and well-being within a range of psychological endeavors. Thus, psychological flexibility can contribute to psychological resilience in difficult times. Furthermore, it can be said that a significant portion of the world's population has developed diagnostic psychopathology in response to this extraordinary event that the world is facing. Transdiagnostic processes are the most effective and widely used processes to support functional development and well-being and to prevent diagnosis. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as harmful alcohol use, staying home, and not following public health guidelines, such as vaccination. High levels of psychological resilience mediate the negative effects of COVID-19-related health anxiety, anxiety, and depression. In addition, two psychological resilience processes—cognitive dissociation and value-oriented actions—reduce mental health anxiety.

Conversely, acceptance (being open to internal turmoil), an element of the psychological flexibility process, mediates the increase in negative mental health outcomes. However, these processes reduced the negative effects of mental health anxiety during the lockdown. These results suggest that allowing oneself to experience internal turmoil, observing unhelpful thoughts, and engaging in value-oriented actions increases psychological resilience in the face of adversity. A review of the literature reveals the importance of the relationship between COVID-19 fear, perceived coping ability, perceived stress, and avoidance of the experience. No study in our country has examined these variables together. Based on the effects of the above-mentioned stress and coping mechanisms on general health and mental health, investigating the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on coping with stress and anxiety directly contributes to the field of mental health and, indirectly, to general health. A review of the literature suggests that avoidance of experience may be a determining factor in this effect. For these reasons, this study is expected to serve as a resource for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts aimed at protecting and maintaining individuals' mental health.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a complex public health challenge that requires a multifaceted research approach. While medical advances are crucial, understanding and supporting society's psychological and social responses is equally vital to minimizing overall harm. Clearly identifying the public's psychological reactions—including fears, anxieties, and avoidance behaviors—and recognizing at-risk groups are essential to containing the pandemic's biopsychosocial impact. Accurate information must be provided by the state, healthcare professionals, and journalists, who carry significant responsibility in this effort. Guiding individuals toward effective psychological support and anxiety-management methods, such as supportive cognitive-behavioral therapy and relaxation techniques, will help strengthen mental resilience. Ultimately, integrating social and psychological insights with prevention strategies is key to effectively managing and ending the pandemic. Droplet and contact precautions should be taken to detect and isolate each case and prevent the spread of the disease. The use of masks as personal protection is a key part of these precautions. Physical distancing precautions are recommended to reduce the likelihood of virus transmission. Ventilation of indoor spaces is crucial to prevent transmission. General hygiene measures, such as frequent and proper handwashing, have been essential for reducing the risk of contamination. The health status of individuals should be comprehensively considered, and psychosocial problems should be identified and addressed early.

In order to more effectively diagnose mental disorders in individuals seeking primary care, primary care physicians should increase their knowledge and awareness of mental disorders through in-service training. Individuals should have easy access to psychological counseling and support services in crisis situations such as pandemics. Plans should be developed to provide online services as an alternative during times when face-to-face access to psychiatric diagnosis, treatment, and support services is limited. Supportive and guiding steps should be taken to increase psychological resilience, which is a protective factor in mental disorders. It is particularly important to equip individuals with the skills to cope with problems starting from childhood, a crucial period of development. Supportive attitudes should be instilled in family and school life from childhood, and stress-adaptation skills should be instilled. Primary care physicians should also be able to advise on factors that promote psychological resilience. Participation in sports and arts activities, which are known to enhance psychological resilience, should be encouraged from an early age. In light of current research findings, intervention programs could incorporate techniques that support cognitive flexibility, such as recognizing and reappraising crises, generating new solutions in context, and taking control. Alternatively, to reduce COVID-19 fear and health anxiety, individuals could receive psychoeducation about the structure of the COVID-19 virus, its transmission routes, and the coping and emotion regulation skills necessary to effectively manage the current situation.

Furthermore, teaching mindfulness techniques may have a protective effect on mental health by enabling individuals to remain calm in crisis situations and prevent loss of control. It is also very important to obtain accurate information about the virus during a pandemic. Continuous exposure to news about the pandemic from social media or television can increase both health anxiety and fear and anxiety levels in individuals. In this context, it is considered important for authorities to regularly inform the public to reduce anxiety levels in society. In the context of a pandemic, it is thought that psychoeducational training, which focuses on skills such as stress management and breathing exercises, may be useful for individuals to balance anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic can affect many areas of human life, including family, work, school, friendships, the economy, and health. During this period, it may be important to encourage people to maintain their routines and seek social support. In addition, online mental health services can be supported to improve service delivery during a pandemic.

## Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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