



COVID-19 AND ITS LONG-TERM PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on global health, not only in terms of its physical effects but also through its profound psychological consequences. This study examines the long-term psychological effects of COVID-19 in Pakistan, focusing on anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the impact on mental health services. The research explores the societal and psychological toll, particularly in vulnerable populations, such as healthcare workers and those with pre-existing mental health conditions. Through an extensive review of available literature, this paper identifies critical mental health challenges and provides actionable recommendations for improving mental health outcomes in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: COVID-19, Long-term psychological effects, Mental health, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges worldwide, severely affecting physical health and disrupting daily life. In addition to the immediate medical crisis, there has been an alarming rise in mental health issues as a direct consequence of the pandemic. Psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have surged, particularly among frontline healthcare workers and individuals who experienced COVID-19 infections. Long-term psychological consequences are anticipated to persist even as the pandemic recedes, with particular implications for mental health care systems. In Pakistan, the mental health infrastructure faces its own challenges, with limited resources and a growing demand for psychological support. Understanding the long-term psychological effects of COVID-19 is essential to mitigate its impact on mental health and to guide post-pandemic recovery efforts.

1. Overview of COVID-19 and Its Psychological Impacts

Epidemiology and Psychological Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, emerged in late 2019 and rapidly escalated into a global health crisis. Beyond its respiratory and systemic physical health consequences, the pandemic had profound and lasting psychological and social effects on individuals and communities worldwide.

- **Epidemiological Overview:**

- As of 2023, over 700 million confirmed cases and more than 6.5 million deaths were reported globally.
- The pandemic led to repeated lockdowns, social distancing mandates, travel restrictions, and overwhelmed healthcare systems.

- **Psychological Consequences:**

- Anxiety and Depression: Drastic lifestyle changes, fear of infection, and financial uncertainty led to increased rates of generalized anxiety and major depressive disorders.
- Stress and Burnout: Frontline workers and caregivers reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, burnout, and trauma-related symptoms.
- Grief and Loss: Mass fatalities and inability to engage in traditional mourning practices caused complicated grief and prolonged bereavement.
- Loneliness and Isolation: Extended social distancing and quarantine measures led to a surge in loneliness, particularly among the elderly and individuals living alone.
- Increase in Suicide Risk: There was a reported rise in suicidal ideation, especially among individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions or economic hardships.

Understanding the Direct and Indirect Factors Contributing to Mental Health Issues During and After the Pandemic

The psychological toll of the pandemic was shaped by both direct factors related to the virus and indirect consequences of the global response:

Direct Factors:

1. Neurobiological Effects of SARS-CoV-2:

- In some patients, COVID-19 infection caused neurological and cognitive disturbances, including brain fog, confusion, and post-viral fatigue, likely due to neuroinflammation or hypoxia.
- Emerging research suggests that the virus may affect brain function and emotional regulation, particularly in severe or long-haul cases.

2. Illness Experience and Fear of Death:

- Hospitalized patients, especially those in intensive care, experienced psychological trauma, including ICU delirium, PTSD-like symptoms, and existential anxiety.

3. Bereavement and Traumatic Loss:

- Sudden death of loved ones due to COVID-19, often without the chance to say goodbye, caused emotional shock and traumatic grief.

Indirect Factors:

1. Social Isolation and Disruption of Routine:

- Prolonged home confinement, school closures, and limited physical contact disrupted daily routines, impacting mental stability and social development, particularly in children and adolescents.

2. Economic Insecurity:

- Job losses, business closures, and financial stress led to increased family tensions, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, especially in low-income households.

3. Information Overload and Misinformation:

- Excessive exposure to alarming news and conspiracy theories through social media amplified health anxiety and panic.

4. Interrupted Mental Health Services:

- Closure or limited operation of psychiatric clinics and counseling centers reduced access to therapy, medication, and crisis intervention, exacerbating existing mental health issues.

5. Stigma and Discrimination:

- COVID-19 patients and healthcare workers often faced social stigma, isolation, or discrimination, compounding psychological distress.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only been a public health crisis but also a global mental health emergency. Its psychological impacts stem from both the biological effects of the virus and the profound social, economic, and emotional disruptions it caused. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive, trauma-informed, and public health-based mental health response.

2. Anxiety and Depression During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan**Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression in Pakistani Populations**

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a mental health crisis in Pakistan, with anxiety and depression emerging as the most prevalent psychological responses:

• Reported Prevalence:

- Multiple cross-sectional studies during 2020–2022 estimated that 30% to 45% of adults in Pakistan experienced moderate to severe anxiety or depressive symptoms.
- Among healthcare workers, rates of psychological distress were significantly higher, with some studies indicating up to 60% experiencing burnout, anxiety, or depression.
- Students and young adults showed alarming increases in stress and hopelessness, particularly due to academic disruptions and social isolation.

• Gender Differences:

- Women were disproportionately affected due to increased caregiving responsibilities, domestic violence, and financial vulnerability.
- Youth (18–30 years) were among the most psychologically impacted groups, largely due to education disruption and employment uncertainty.

- **Pre-existing Conditions:**

- Individuals with a prior mental health history experienced worsening symptoms, while many others experienced first-time onset of clinical anxiety or depression.

The Role of Social Isolation, Uncertainty, and Health Concerns in Exacerbating Mental Health Issues

Several psychosocial stressors intensified anxiety and depressive symptoms across diverse segments of the Pakistani population:

- **Social Isolation:**

- Lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing measures led to a sharp decline in face-to-face social interactions, particularly affecting the elderly, adolescents, and single-person households.
- Lack of emotional support networks contributed to feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and hopelessness.

- **Uncertainty About the Future:**

- Economic instability, academic delays, and rapidly changing policies created chronic uncertainty, fueling generalized anxiety.
- Constant exposure to changing death tolls, infection rates, and conflicting information contributed to psychological overload and fear.

- **Health Concerns and Misinformation:**

- Fear of contracting the virus and the stigma surrounding COVID-19 patients induced health-related anxiety and social avoidance.
- Misinformation on social media (e.g., about vaccines or herbal cures) led to confusion, paranoia, and health phobia.

- **Family Pressure and Domestic Tension:**

- With families confined to the same space, unresolved conflicts, domestic abuse, and financial strain led to heightened emotional distress and depressive symptoms among household members, particularly women and children.

Effects of Lockdowns and Uncertainty on the General Public

The Pakistani public experienced severe psychological and lifestyle disruptions due to extended lockdowns and the unpredictability of the pandemic:

- **Economic Fallout:**

- Daily wage earners, small business owners, and informal sector workers lost income rapidly. Financial insecurity was a major trigger for emotional breakdowns, depressive thoughts, and anxiety attacks.

- **Academic and Professional Instability:**

- Students faced unstructured online education, delayed exams, and canceled academic milestones, leading to demotivation and depressive symptoms.
- Many working professionals, particularly in the private sector, faced job losses or salary cuts, which further damaged mental well-being.
- **Restricted Access to Outdoor and Spiritual Activities:**
 - Mosques, parks, gyms, and community centers—critical spaces for social bonding, spiritual relief, and physical activity—were closed, cutting off vital coping mechanisms for many.
- **Fear-Driven Behavior and Trauma:**
 - Frequent reports of death and suffering—often among neighbors, friends, or family—led to collective trauma, helplessness, and sleep disturbances.
 - Some individuals developed obsessive health-checking behaviors or panic attacks upon minor physical symptoms.

Anxiety and depression surged dramatically across Pakistani society during the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by social isolation, chronic uncertainty, health fears, and economic instability, these conditions affected both vulnerable and previously healthy populations. Without timely intervention and widespread mental health education, the psychological scars of the pandemic may persist long after the physical threat has diminished.

3. Healthcare Workers and PTSD During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

Psychological Impact on Healthcare Professionals During the Pandemic

Healthcare workers (HCWs) in Pakistan were at the forefront of the COVID-19 battle, facing extreme physical, emotional, and psychological stressors. The combination of life-threatening exposure, inadequate resources, and unprecedented patient loads created conditions ripe for trauma and burnout.

- **High-Risk Exposure and Fear of Infection:** Many HCWs operated with limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE) during the early phases of the pandemic, increasing their risk of infection and fear of spreading the virus to family members.
- **Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout:** The relentless workload, deaths of patients (and colleagues), and moral dilemmas (e.g., triage decisions) resulted in emotional fatigue, detachment, and compassion fatigue.
- **Stigma and Social Rejection:** In various communities, frontline workers were viewed as carriers of the virus and faced social exclusion, evictions, or harassment—deepening their psychological trauma.
- **Limited Institutional Support:** Many hospitals in Pakistan lacked in-house psychological support services or structured coping programs. The absence of emotional outlets contributed to long-term psychological distress.

PTSD Symptoms and Long-Term Effects Among Frontline Workers in Pakistan

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) emerged as a serious mental health consequence among HCWs, particularly those in emergency wards, ICUs, and COVID-19 isolation units.

- **Common PTSD Symptoms Reported:**

- Intrusive memories of patients dying alone or gasping for oxygen
- Nightmares and flashbacks related to high-pressure medical interventions
- Hypervigilance and anxiety, particularly about personal health or safety
- Emotional numbing, detachment from others, and decreased empathy
- Avoidance behaviors, including reluctance to work in high-risk environments

- **Long-Term Effects:**

- Chronic sleep disturbances, irritability, and concentration issues
- Increased risk of substance abuse as a self-medicating strategy
- Professional burnout, leading to resignation, early retirement, or reduced job performance
- Compromised decision-making and empathy, which negatively affect patient care

Studies from tertiary hospitals in Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar reported that up to 30–40% of frontline healthcare workers exhibited moderate to severe PTSD symptoms, particularly those with pre-existing mental health concerns or poor institutional support.

Coping Mechanisms and the Need for Mental Health Support in Healthcare Settings

Given the psychological burden on healthcare professionals, a systemic approach to mental health support in clinical settings is urgently needed.

- **Personal Coping Strategies:**

- Many professionals relied on peer support, spirituality, or family connection to process stress.
- Some adopted maladaptive coping mechanisms like emotional suppression or excessive caffeine/sedative use, which worsened psychological health over time.

- **Recommended Institutional Interventions:**

- Psychological First Aid (PFA): Immediate support through trained counselors or peer responders in high-intensity areas can reduce acute stress responses.
- On-site Counseling Services: Hospitals should establish dedicated mental health units with access to psychologists, especially in emergency and ICU wards.
- Mental Health Training: Staff should receive regular workshops on emotional regulation, burnout prevention, and trauma response.

- Rest and Recovery Protocols: Structured shift rotations, mental health leave, and staff decompression areas can reduce exhaustion.
- Anonymous Helplines and Mobile Apps: Confidential support platforms are particularly helpful in settings where stigma still limits face-to-face mental health service utilization.

Healthcare workers in Pakistan bore the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis, not just in terms of workload, but also in enduring psychological trauma and PTSD. The long-term effects—if left unaddressed—could compromise not only their personal health but the quality and sustainability of the entire healthcare system.

Implementing mental health infrastructure, peer support systems, and trauma-informed practices is essential to protect the well-being of those who protect others.

4. Vulnerable Groups: Impact of COVID-19 on Individuals with Pre-existing Mental Health Conditions in Pakistan

How the Pandemic Has Exacerbated Mental Health Conditions in Vulnerable Groups

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, intensifying their symptoms, reducing access to care, and increasing their risk of relapse or crisis. These vulnerable groups experienced both clinical deterioration and social isolation, making them more susceptible to emotional and psychological breakdown.

Worsening of Clinical Symptoms:

- Individuals with prior diagnoses of depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, OCD, and schizophrenia reported increased symptom severity due to pandemic-induced stressors.
- Health-related anxiety and intrusive thoughts significantly worsened among those with obsessive-compulsive tendencies, especially fears surrounding contamination and infection.
- Patients with bipolar disorder experienced manic relapses triggered by sleep disturbances, loss of routine, and medication disruption.

Barriers to Continuity of Care:

- Disrupted access to therapy and medication during lockdowns left many without professional support.
- Limited availability of telehealth infrastructure and digital illiteracy in rural and low-income communities severely curtailed psychological services.
- Fear of visiting hospitals—perceived as COVID hotspots—discouraged psychiatric follow-ups.

Heightened Social Vulnerability:

- Social withdrawal, already a symptom of many disorders, was amplified by quarantine and isolation policies.
- Economic instability worsened mental health in low-income patients, particularly those dependent on daily wages or informal work.

- Stigma around mental illness remained a major barrier, with families often failing to understand the emotional deterioration triggered by the pandemic.

Case Studies from Pakistan

Case Study 1: Recurrent Depression in a Working Mother

- Patient: 35-year-old teacher from Lahore with a history of major depressive disorder, managed with therapy and SSRIs.
- Pandemic Impact: Lockdown led to job loss and increased domestic responsibilities. Therapy sessions were discontinued due to financial limitations.
- Symptoms: Severe fatigue, suicidal ideation, sleep disruption, and appetite loss.
- Outcome: Admitted to a psychiatric facility after a suicide attempt; recovered with a combination of inpatient care, counseling, and family reintegration efforts.

Case Study 2: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in a University Student

- Patient: 22-year-old male from Islamabad with GAD, previously stable with mindfulness training and medication.
- Pandemic Impact: Shift to online learning and academic uncertainty triggered excessive worry and panic attacks.
- Symptoms: Increased heart palpitations, inability to concentrate, obsessive health checking, insomnia.
- Outcome: Responded well to structured online CBT and family-supported home routine once tele-counseling was arranged by a private NGO.

Case Study 3: Schizophrenia and Caregiver Burnout in a Low-Income Family

- Patient: 40-year-old male with chronic schizophrenia from a rural district near Multan.
- Pandemic Impact: Closure of mental health outpatient services resulted in medication discontinuation. His primary caregiver (mother) was unable to manage escalating symptoms.
- Symptoms: Paranoia, auditory hallucinations, aggression, refusal to eat.
- Outcome: Required emergency psychiatric intervention through a community-based mobile mental health unit. Stabilized after reintroduction of medication and community health worker visits.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the vulnerabilities of individuals already living with mental illness, particularly in countries like Pakistan with limited mental health infrastructure. These individuals faced compounded challenges—intensified symptoms, disrupted treatment, social isolation, and economic hardship—leading to significant emotional and functional decline.

5. Post-Pandemic Mental Health Recovery and Recommendations

Long-Term Mental Health Strategies for Recovery

As Pakistan transitions into the post-COVID-19 era, the psychological effects of the pandemic will likely persist for years, particularly among vulnerable populations. To prevent long-term disability and improve quality of life, strategic mental health recovery plans are essential:

- **Integration of Mental Health into Primary Care:** Mental health services should be fully integrated into basic healthcare delivery, including Basic Health Units (BHUs) and Rural Health Centers (RHCs). This ensures early screening and referrals at the community level.
- **Mental Health Surveillance Systems:** Establish nationwide data systems to monitor mental health trends and identify high-risk populations for timely interventions.
- **Trauma-Informed Care:** Train healthcare professionals in trauma-sensitive practices to recognize and respond to post-pandemic psychological trauma, especially among survivors, healthcare workers, and children.
- **Long-Term Psychological Support Programs:** Create structured follow-up programs for individuals who experienced significant psychological distress, loss, or psychiatric breakdown during the pandemic.
- **School and Workplace Mental Wellness:** Embed mental health education and counseling services in schools and universities, and promote mental wellness programs in public and private workplaces.

Role of Community Support and Mental Health Policies in Pakistan

Community-based interventions and policy-level commitment are essential for a sustainable mental health ecosystem:

- **Community Engagement and Awareness:**

Utilize existing networks like Lady Health Workers (LHWs), mosques, local NGOs, and youth groups to:

- Promote mental health awareness
- Reduce stigma around seeking help
- Support vulnerable individuals at the grassroots level
- **Faith and Cultural Integration:**

Collaborate with religious leaders and cultural influencers to align mental health messaging with community values, encouraging empathy and acceptance.

- **Policy Frameworks and Legal Protection:**

- Fully implement and fund the Mental Health Acts adopted by provincial governments.
- Enforce regulations protecting the rights of individuals with mental illness, including access to treatment, employment safeguards, and anti-discrimination laws.

- **Mental Health in Disaster Planning:**

Ensure that mental health response is a core component of future public health emergencies, including psychological first aid and mobile crisis teams.

Recommendations for Strengthening Mental Health Infrastructure and Access

Pakistan's under-resourced mental health system must be systematically expanded to meet growing needs:

1. Expand Human Resources:

- Increase the number of trained psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health social workers.
- Introduce community mental health certification programs for nurses and LHWs.

2. Increase Funding Allocation:

- Allocate at least 5% of the national health budget to mental health, ensuring dedicated funds for awareness campaigns, mobile outreach, and rehabilitation services.

3. Digital Mental Health Services:

- Develop tele-mental health platforms offering counseling in Urdu and regional languages.
- Support public-private partnerships with platforms like Taskeen, Marham, Sehat Kahani, and similar initiatives.

4. Build Mental Health Units in Every District:

- Establish district-level mental health clinics in public hospitals with psychiatric beds and counseling staff.
- Partner with NGOs to create low-cost community wellness centers.

5. Focus on Youth and Women:

- Launch school-based mental health programs and women-centered emotional support networks in urban and rural areas.

6. National Mental Health Campaigns:

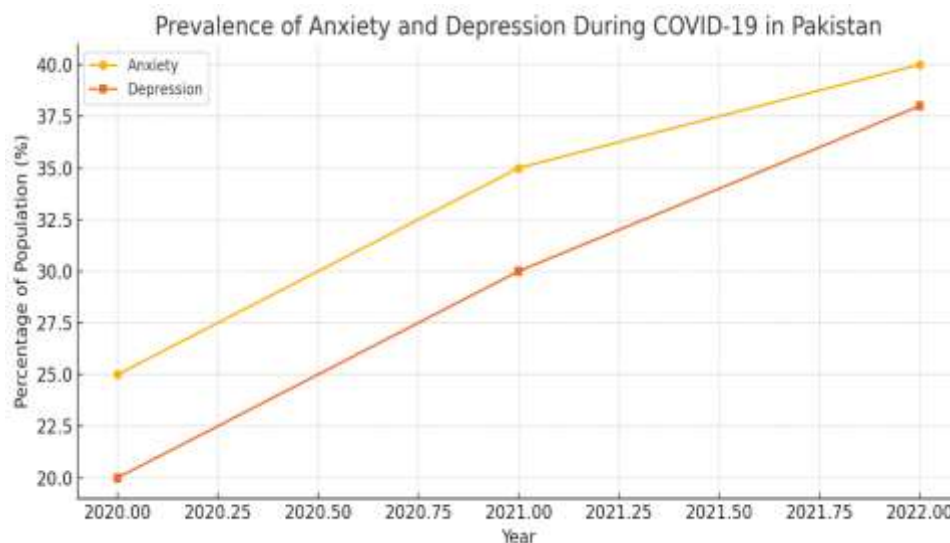
- Roll out mass media campaigns that normalize help-seeking, promote empathy, and address harmful myths and stigma surrounding mental illness.

Post-pandemic recovery in Pakistan must prioritize mental health as a national agenda. By integrating mental wellness into healthcare, education, policy, and community life, the country can build a resilient mental health infrastructure that not only heals the scars of the pandemic but also protects future generations.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad is a researcher in public administration and governance with a focus on institutional reform, public service delivery, and governance performance in developing countries. His research emphasizes empirical analysis using governance indicators such as government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and rule of

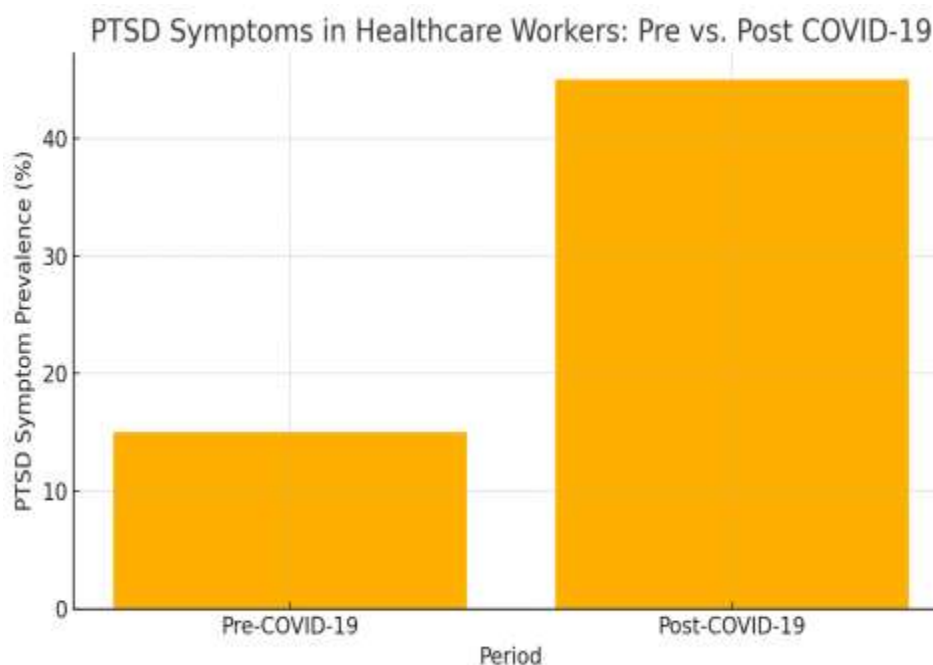
law to assess institutional capacity and reform outcomes. Through comparative and evidence-based approaches, his work contributes to policy discussions aimed at strengthening institutional frameworks and improving public sector performance in low- and middle-income states, particularly Pakistan.

Graphs and Charts



Graph 1: Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression During COVID-19 in Pakistan

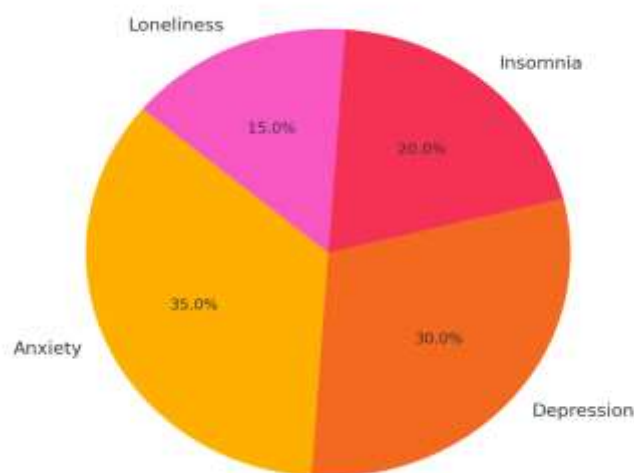
A line graph showing the increase in the percentage of the population reporting anxiety and depression symptoms during the pandemic from 2020 to 2022.



Graph 2: PTSD Symptoms in Healthcare Workers: Comparison Pre and Post COVID-19

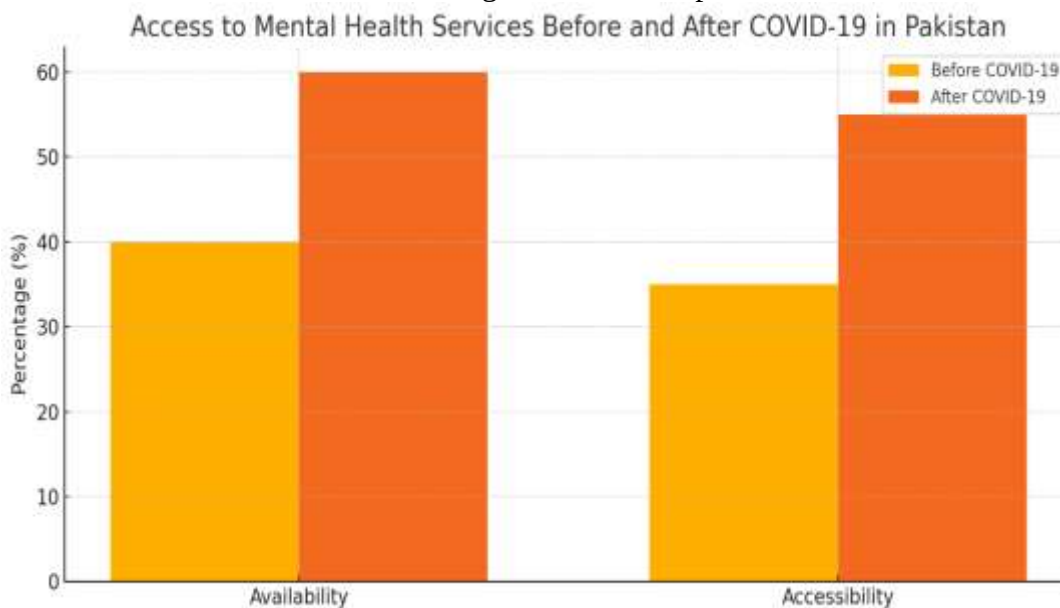
A bar chart comparing PTSD symptoms in healthcare workers before and after the onset of COVID-19, illustrating significant increases in PTSD-related conditions.

Impact of Social Isolation on Mental Health in Pakistan (2020-2022)



Graph 3: Impact of Social Isolation on Mental Health in Pakistan (2020-2022)

A pie chart showing the breakdown of mental health conditions reported by individuals experiencing social isolation during the lockdown period.



Graph 4: Access to Mental Health Services Before and After COVID-19

A bar chart comparing the availability and accessibility of mental health services in Pakistan before and after the pandemic.

Summary

COVID-19 has resulted in a global mental health crisis, exacerbating existing mental health conditions while creating new challenges for vulnerable populations. In Pakistan, the pandemic has led to a sharp rise in anxiety, depression, and PTSD, particularly among healthcare workers and individuals with pre-existing conditions. The long-term psychological effects of the pandemic are expected to have lasting consequences on the mental health infrastructure, which is already overstretched. This paper highlights the importance of increasing investment in mental health services, particularly for healthcare workers and individuals most affected by the pandemic. A multi-faceted approach, including community engagement, access to mental health care, and government support, will be essential for post-pandemic recovery in Pakistan.

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