

# Psychology of Coping with Quarantine

The latest psychological research has unearthed some surprising mental effects of quarantine.

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## — What is the long term effect of quarantine?

Three years after you have been released from quarantine, you can still suffer from profound psychological effects.

### iOWNA gem

*Elevated rates of mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress, depression and alcoholism, can all be traced back to the stress of confinement, three years earlier.*

These are the conclusions of a study published in The Lancet by a group of UK mental health experts (including Dr Neil Greenberg, a psychiatrist who has served in the army and been deployed to various hostile environments including Afghanistan and Iraq) attempted to comprehensively review the body of previous published scientific research into psychological survival of quarantine.

Titled, 'The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence', this investigation also found profound impacts on lives beyond the issue of mental health, long after the quarantine was over. For some, the return to normality was delayed by many months.

### iOWNA gem

*In health care workers avoidance behaviours such as minimising direct contact with patients persisted for weeks after being released from quarantine.*

*54% of people who had been quarantined avoided those who were coughing or sneezing, 26% avoided crowded enclosed places, and 21% avoided all public spaces in the weeks following quarantine.*

This investigation also reviewed evidence that Governments should be cautious about introducing quarantine as some of the effects can be counter-productive. One study argued that 'lock-down' measures may inadvertently spread disease because the economic hardship increases the migration of potentially infected people from affected areas.

## — What did we learn about quarantine from SARS?

One of the studies quoted examined the enforced quarantine of a hospital in Taiwan following a SARS outbreak there in 2003. All 930 staff were ordered into a two-week quarantine, yet expected to perform duties as usual. All 240 patients, along with 129 visitors and outpatients, were imprisoned in the hospital for at least 14 days while the police cordoned off the building. After watching some health care workers die from SARS, some medical staff tried to escape, while others refused to provide care for the ill. Telephone lines and television cables were cut by the authorities citing security reasons, adding to the terror and mental strain of their 'lock-down'.

The authors of this particular investigation into the Taipei Municipal Heping Hospital SARS quarantine of 2003, Donna Barbisch, Kristi Koenig and Fuh-Yuan Shih, point out that the full psychological impact was revealed when, on just the third day of confinement, a depressed man who was suspected of having SARS hanged himself in the hospital. This was despite psychiatric counselling. The following day, another suicide attempt was halted when another was prevented from jumping out a window.

## — How do the young cope with quarantine?

An investigation into the quarantine that occurred during a 2007 Australian outbreak of highly infectious equine influenza found that those with one child had a 1.2 times higher risk of high psychological distress than those with no children. This study also found that having three or more children appeared protective against high psychological distress. This intriguing finding could be attributed to three children simply being a marker for being older.

### iOWNA gem

*This study found one of the primary factors associated with high psychological distress during an epidemic was age. Those aged 16-24 reported highest levels of psychological distress.*

It therefore appears that in post-quarantine it could be the young who need the most psychological support. We might thus lose a whole generation, psychologically, not virally, to this pandemic. The elderly may be most vulnerable to physical attack from COVID-19 but it is the young who might be least immune to the longer-term mental effects once quarantine is over.

Another possible explanation for this fascinating finding is suggested by some research conducted in Pittsburgh USA where people were quarantined because attempts were being made to infect them deliberately:

Published in the academic journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* and titled 'Parenthood and Host Resistance to the Common Cold', this study investigated immune resistance to viruses by quarantining subjects and then administering nasal drops containing one of four common cold viruses. They were then monitored for the development of a clinical cold. The study found that the more children you have, the more resistant you are to getting the common cold.

## — Factors associated with psychological resilience during quarantine

The Lancet review found a major cause of psychological strain was worrying that physical symptoms being experienced were potentially related to the infection. This fear that the symptoms could reflect having the infection continued to be related to future mental health difficulties several months later.

For parents with lots of children their resilience may be down to infections being more regularly brought into the home. They may also be better at shrugging off ambiguous or irrelevant symptoms, or simply don't get them.

## — Does being in quarantine increase the chance of getting symptoms?

We all get physical symptoms from time to time but we give them little attention and they usually go away of their own accord. Quarantine may impact our awareness of symptoms, but does not increase the likelihood of them occurring.

### iOWNA gem

*During quarantine we perhaps become hypervigilant for signs we have the very thing we are being quarantined against. This constant worrying about any symptoms might take a more significant toll on our mental health than previously appreciated.*

As the physical symptoms of anxiety can look very similar to a viral infection (for example: headache, difficulty breathing or hyperventilation and also a cough) it is possible to enter a panic cycle. Your anxiety makes you believe you have the viral infection you dread, you then mistake physical panic symptoms for the flu, and you then descend into a spiral of increasing mental and physical distress.

## — In conclusion, 'altruism is better than compulsion'

The conclusion of the investigation into the stress of quarantine recently published in The Lancet argues that 'altruism is better than compulsion'.

The authors contend that people cope better with quarantine if they feel they have made an altruistic choice, rather than being quarantined through external enforcement or a feeling of obligation. If we are made to endure the many sacrifices of quarantine, without it being clear exactly why it's necessary, then poorer coping and worse mental health becomes more likely.

A centralised state-controlled system, like the NHS, is better equipped to prevent this. In the NHS you can't very easily consult a practice beyond the one you are registered with. You also can't see specialist practitioners without a formal referral from your GP.

During normal times these limitations might be irritating, but in a pandemic these restrictions may curtail 'super-spreading'.

## References

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