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Navigating COVID-19: Insights from research on social ostracism

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing and lockdowns has caused unprecedented changes to social life. We consider the possible implications of these changes for mental health. Drawing from research on social ostracism emphasizing the importance of social connection for mental well-being, there is reason for concern regarding the mental health effects of the crisis. However, there are also reasons for optimism; people can be surprisingly resilient to stressful situations, the impact of ostracism tends to depend on social norms (which are rapidly changing), and mental health depends primarily on having at least one or two close social connections. Given the scale and unprecedented nature of the social disruption that occurred, we see strong reason for concern, but not despair.

Keywords

COVID-19, ostracism, pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented upheaval to global public health and national economies. As of this writing, over one million people have succumbed to the disease, and the economic impact is incalculable. Humans have made marvelous strides in the fight against the persistent threat of infectious diseases (for example, ending polio and smallpox). However, the present pandemic has impacted the world in a sudden and drastic way, and we are seeing the global, national, interpersonal, and individual toll of the pandemic.

The public health and economic consequences of the pandemic will surely be felt for years to come. In the present article, however, we are concerned with the immediate *mental health* consequences of the pandemic, and its associated lockdowns. Natural disasters and public tragedies typically activate a group-level desire to circle the wagons, rally the troops, and tend-and-befriend (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011; Pennebaker & Harbor, 1993). Yet the nature of the virus means that these would-be solutions actually accelerate its physical threat.

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Here we will examine the psychological implications of the pandemic, and the social-distancing guidelines, in light of research on social ostracism, belonging, and connection. The pandemic has led to widespread social distancing, lockdowns, and, in many cases, a moratorium on all non-essential in-person socializing. What impact will this have on the mental health of highly social humans? There are reasons for deep concern about public mental health, but, perhaps surprisingly, there are also some reasons for optimism. We discuss both, and conclude that given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, an abundance of caution/concern for mental health is warranted.

Reasons for Concern

People are deeply social and depend on one another not only to satisfy their physical needs, but also their need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A global pandemic requiring people to remain distant from each other appears to be a storm perfectly designed to activate the negative mental health consequences of ostracism. Ostracism – being ignored and excluded – is a particularly negative social experience because it simultaneously threatens several basic needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, meaningful existence, and certainty (Hales & Williams, 2020; Williams, 2009). Furthermore, the tendency to respond negatively to ostracism is indiscriminate; people feel badly when ostracized, even when provided with abundant external reasons for the exclusion (e.g., Zadro et al., 2004). A global pandemic is almost a caricature of how external an attribution can be – people know *they* are not the reason they are not socializing – yet the pain of ostracism will likely still be felt. Together, the body of research on social ostracism would lead to a relatively grim prognosis for people's ability to mentally cope with the levels of aloneness that are necessary during lockdowns. And indeed, early research does suggest that there are noticeable declines in well-being since the pandemic has taken effect (McGinty et al., 2020).

Of the needs threatened by ostracism, the need for *certainty* (Hogg, 2007) is of particular concern during the pandemic and experiences of social distancing. Even under ordinary circumstances, ostracism triggers enormous uncertainty, as people wonder if they are being intentionally excluded, and if so, for what reason, and for how long it will last (Williams et al., 2019). The current pandemic likely exacerbates this uncertainty in two ways. First, it raises questions about the nature of the public health threat itself. What contact is allowed? What behavior and locations are safe? Is it pointless to wear a mask? Is it dangerous not to? Second, it raises questions about how long it will last. When will there be a vaccine to end this strange chapter in history? When the vaccine arrives will it work safely? Even if it works, will people take it? Moreover, in a strange twist of irony, the very behavior that this uncertainty would motivate – affiliation with groups (Hogg, 2007) – is proscribed, at least in person, by the current situation.

This need-threat and uncertainty is important, not only for the effect it has on individuals' well-being, but also because of its interpersonal and intergroup consequences. Specifically, researchers have already begun to speculate about the possible consequences of the pandemic on violent extremism (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020). People are experiencing increased time alone for an extended and unknown period of time. This is concerning because past research suggests that when people are told they are bound to live their future alone they use aggression as a means to gain back control (Twenge et al., 2001). During a time of unprecedented isolation and uncertainty, even subtle hints of ostracism may lead people to view aggressive beliefs and behaviors as acceptable. After experiencing weeks or months in quarantine or rejection through job loss, people may turn to virtual mediums to connect with other frustrated individuals who are radicalizing online. People feel more uncertain and are more open to extreme groups after being ostracized (Hales & Williams, 2018). The subtle and overt rejection people are experiencing during the pandemic may lead them to see extreme groups as an appealing means to fulfill their deprived sense of belonging/self-esteem and threatened sense of

control/meaning. Durkheim (1893/1973) was probably overstating things when he pronounced, "Let all social life disappear, and morality will disappear with it" (p. 137). However, modern theorizing does provide reason to be concerned that, in a population of millions of people, social isolation can only increase the chances that a certain number will be drawn towards violent extremism. Specifically, the staircase to terrorism theory suggests that people will go to more and more extreme means to satisfy unmet needs (Moghaddam, 2005), and uncertainty-identity theory makes the same prediction, with a special focus on the need for certainty (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). Once becoming exposed to extreme communities, isolated and rejected people may use radical ideologies to achieve their goals and meet their social needs.

While there is never a good time for a civilization-disrupting global pandemic, it is fortunate that the current outbreak occurred at a time in history when we have the technology to provide surrogate social connection, through social networking platforms and videoconferencing (see also Blanchard, 2021, for further discussion of virtual working). Indeed, since the beginning of the pandemic, videoconferencing and social media use have increased sizably (Richter, 2020; Williamson, 2020). However, there are reasons to believe that these technologies are poor substitutes for face-to-face interaction (even when they are not competing with face-to-face affiliation; Hales et al., 2018; Kushlev et al., 2017). First, videoconferencing is likely better than absolute isolation, yet the technology still includes lag time and camera angle ambiguities that make interaction clumsy, difficult, and stress-inducing (Murphy, 2020). Ostracism studies find that even minimal cues of reduced eye contact meaningfully trigger feelings of ostracism and threats to basic needs (Wesselmann et al., 2012; Wirth et al., 2010). Moreover, social media use itself has been linked to poor mental health (Shakya & Christakis, 2017), and algorithmically provides customized news information that can often be polarizing (e.g., Brady et al., 2017) which could accelerate the path to extremism described above (see also Cameron and Tenenbaum [2021] for further discussion of this in light of the social development of younger generations).

Reasons for Optimism

Despite these concerns, ostracism theory and research does offer reason to expect people to be able to resiliently weather the storm. First, the temporal need-threat model of ostracism (Williams, 2009) argues that following the immediate detection of ostracism (and associated pain-response), people begin to quickly recover their basic needs satisfaction. In other words, the pain is not permanent. The model further articulates that only some people go on to enter the final *resignation* stage; in other words, it is typical for most people to call on available social and emotional resources to bolster and recover their basic needs before experiencing alienation, unworthiness, helplessness, and depression.

Further, need-to-belong theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) emphasizes the importance of one or two close social connections for mental well-being. The pandemic has undoubtedly decreased the amount of contact people have with their peripheral social networks, but it also seems to have *increased* the amount of time people spend with their nuclear social contacts, with more family members living together rather than alone (Fry et al., 2020). Large social networks are certainly desirable and add to the richness of life; however, the maintenance of close social contacts is the key vital sign to monitor for how resiliently people respond to the current situation.

A second reason to expect resilience in the face of the pandemic is that social norms have shifted rapidly since the onset of social-distancing protocols. Prior to the pandemic it would have been somewhat unusual in many cultures to see people wearing masks out in public, and truly bizarre for friends to confidently insist that "six feet of distance" be maintained between them. But these appear to have become largely accepted as normal practices, at least among many. This is meaningful, because ostracism appears to hurt substantially less when norms are structured such

that it is expected for people to not be acknowledged (Rudert & Greifeneder, 2016; see also Packer et al., 2021, for further discussion of conformity and deviance during COVID-19). People are likely to understand that the social-distancing behaviors of the people around them are not a reflection of their relational value (i.e., the extent to which they are regarded as valuable, socially close, and important to those around them; Leary, 1999), but simply a matter of practical necessity. There is likely still a reflexive negative response triggered by, for example, being asked to stand six feet back. However, the rapidly shifting norms mean that people could well be equipped to more readily recover basic needs following such an encounter.

Conclusion

There appear to be several forces currently affecting well-being, some pushing toward catastrophically poor mental health, and others acting to resiliently maintain ordinary mental health. Predicting which forces will win out is impossible, but also unnecessary. The pandemic is unlike anything seen in recent times, and the costs of over-preparation for serious mental health outcomes are less serious than the costs of under-preparation. Additionally, we have focused on the direct mental health consequences of social distancing, but have not addressed the considerable indirect mental and physical health effects of the economic disruption caused by the pandemic and shutdowns. Together, these effects will likely last for years to come, and social scientists should be ready to investigate the resources needed to combat the systemic harm exacerbated and caused by the pandemic.

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