



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Croatia

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Summary

Mental illness is a topic that is not quite often discussed in the media given its importance in general, but especially during the times of COVID-19 pandemic. In Croatia, people have been seeking for help more and more, however, not only due to fear of virus, but the March earthquake which struck Zagreb and surrounding areas severely. There have been several studies conducted on mental health issues among citizens in Croatia, and this paper will present a brief overview and conclusions on this topic.

Introduction

Since 1992, 10th October is celebrated as the World Mental Health Day, but this year, the circumstances surrounding it have been different on a global scale due to COVID-19 pandemic, followed by social and economic challenges and uncertainties that are still ahead of us. The purpose of this day is to promote global education on mental illness, and to raise awareness about the importance of society in providing support for those who have been the victims of this, often neglected, illness. However, even without the global virus pandemic, mental health represents something that is hard to fight against since many people find it difficult to openly talk about. Furthermore, it can be heard that the people with mental illness would often consider themselves stigmatized if the reports of their condition would reach other people, therefore, many of them decide to keep it quiet and fight the disease on their own. Today, our daily routines have changed more than ever before, and large sums of people are required to adapt to what is nowadays called “a new normality”, considering the restrictive measures of physical distance introduced in order to prevent to COVID-19 spread. This caused more and more people to feel disintegrated from the society and has contributed to a general feel of loneliness, especially during the period of lockdown when everyone was to stay at home and go out only when it was utmost necessary.

The Croatian Context

In a recent interview given for the commercial television in Croatia, Gordana Buljan Flander, a director of Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Center, has talked about the effects of coronavirus disease on Croatian population. Buljan Flander expressed her worries that some people simply cannot adapt to “a new normality” and that citizens of Zagreb and surrounding areas were additionally traumatized by the earthquake that happened in March. Even seven months later, it can be heard from people who lived closer to the epicenter area that they are still scared and concerned that a new earthquake could soon strike again. Also, many people have developed a sense of discomfort if they hear some loud music playing or the sound of beating and drumming in the distance, feeling that something wrong could happen. As a consequence of the March earthquake, some people went so far that they started to consume alcoholic beverages as a means of appeasement. In the same interview, Buljan Flander emphasized that studies have shown more and more children with the symptoms of PTSD. She warned that parents should swiftly react if they observe that their child has returned to some old habits such as wetting the bed, sudden mood swings or if they suddenly become socially distanced. Željka Kamenov from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences argued that the consequences of Zagreb earthquake and COVID-19 pandemic, or epidemic in Croatia, could be severe and subsequently might be manifested in the shape of depression and anxiety pandemic, with more and more suicidal attempts. She urged the decision-makers and authorities to cooperate with civil sector organizations in funding their psychosocial services and activities.

Studies on Mental Health During the Pandemic

In June, the Department for Psychology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences released the preliminary results of their study conducted with an aim to identify the consequences of the earthquake and COVID-19 pandemic and to determine how it has affected the everyday life of Croatian citizens. The study was composed of more than 3500 people from age 18 to 95, with more than 750 students of primary and secondary school. According to the results, almost half of the respondents were faced with significant levels of depression, anxiety and stress. 29% had mild or moderate levels of depression, while every fifth respondent had harsh and severe levels of depression. Furthermore, women and those who have respected the restrictive measures and measures of isolation more, have shown the higher decline in mental health. However, when it comes to comparison of mental health prior and after the pandemic, the results are following: among those who did not have any mental issues prior to the

pandemic, 66% said that their mental state is the same as before, while almost 25% said that their condition has worsened. Among those who did have mental issues, 37% answered that their condition has worsened, almost 17% were faced with some form of mental issue change, for example the transition from anxiety to depression, while 34% said that everything is the same as before. What has been very troubling is the fact that, among those whose situation during the pandemic has worsened, almost 30% are suffering from hard or extremely hard levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Moreover, they are not satisfied with their lives and they are less optimistic in general about the future. When it comes to relationships between parents and children, almost two-thirds of parents said that they were spending more time with their children during the pandemic and that children would often help them with housework.

The Socio-Economic Position of Young People

However, the social and economic environment has changed and it has affected younger population maybe more than any other. Croatia is one of the leading European countries with unemployed youth and now the situation has even more downgraded. Apart from having trouble in finding a job, the contracts that employers are usually offering to young people are short-term or, in different cases, they have to go through some sort of internship programs to be evaluated as a candidate for a job position in the first place. Thus, many young people in Croatia are unsure about their future and would gladly like to go to some other country where the social and economic conditions are better. However, it must be noted that these conditions are not solely responsible for the problem of youth. It is more likely that the approach of employers who often consider themselves as superior to others or the “look down” approach that demotivates young people from having a certain job. Therefore, we are witnessing the evidences of radicalization among youth, especially on social media. Unfortunately, it became reality when a 25-year old Danijel Bezuk shot and wounded a police officer in front of St. Mark’s Square, just before the building of Croatian Government. Many argued that this was a terrorist attack and that Bezuk’s intention was to enter the Government building and head for Croatian Prime Minister. Even Andrej Plenković himself was following the same argumentation in his recent comments. Nevertheless, it is now apparent that radicalization among youth is not a fiction, but a reality, and that everyone should be extremely careful when making decisions that would affect their, already vague, future. This should also be taken into account by the Civil Protection Directorate which has to understand that young people, even sometimes irresponsible and reckless, simply cannot completely obey their restrictive

measures, otherwise they will be the ones who will find themselves in the category among those with worsened mental conditions.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and Zagreb earthquake have taken its toll and lately many people who have suffered the positive result of the disease are advised not to tell anybody about that, otherwise they will face with social stigma. Of course, this is completely wrong understanding of the situation and by the very purpose of the World Mental Health Day, people should tell each other about their problems and seek help when help is necessary.