ARCBITE

Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

Mental health and COVID-19 – findings from a diary project

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Background

COVID-19 is impacting the lives of communities and individuals across the world. We wanted to understand how people in the North West Coast were affected and how best to capture this information in real time when traditional research methods were not practical. Our study aimed to test out a diary method to collect public insights and experiences of how the coronavirus was affecting daily life in local communities.

How did we involve people?

All ARC-NWC Public Advisers were contacted to see if they would like to take part in the Diary Project: Advisers are recruited to ARC-NWC because of lived experience of a particular health situation or because they are resident in a locality where research is taking place. Fifteen Advisers signed up and all completed the project.

What did we do?

Each participant was teamed up with an EPHC theme researcher. They took part in an introductory telephone or video call session and then completed an on-line diary for 8 weeks from 20th April to 14th June 2020. Each week the participant and researcher also had a catch-up call. At the end of the 8 weeks, participants were invited to an on-line focus group to explore their experience of the project before researchers analysed all of the information using NVIVO12 (data analysis software). Participants then took part in a public involvement online workshop to discuss emerging themes in August 2020. Ethical approval for the study was granted from Lancaster University Faculty of Health and Medicine's Ethics Committee in April 2020.

This 'Research Bite' focuses on the effects of living through the pandemic on mental health. By mental health we mean people's 'emotional health' or 'well-being' as well as mental health problems such as depression. Other Bites in the series are (i) the diary process (ii) lockdown rules and regulations and (iii) the use of technology.

What did we find?

Participants who completed diaries included those who were in 'at risk' groups for COVID-19, people in shielding households, people living on their own and families with children. As such, participant observations documented in the diaries provide a varied picture, reflecting how they were experiencing the lockdown and pandemic differently.

Overall, we found that everyone's mental health was affected in some way and at some time by the pandemic. When looking at the diaries over the 8 weeks, participants commonly reported ups and downs in their emotions and feelings. As this participant describes they started the week well, but by Saturday was *'really tired, physically, emotionally and spiritually'* (week4-Diary 5-call). For another individual, the effect on their mental health caught up with them several weeks into lockdown. *'I have realised this week how big an impact lockdown is having on my mental health. I am trying really hard to be optimistic but it's difficult'* (week4-Diary-14).

It was evident from the diaries that particular groups also faced additional pressures that they had to deal with.

- Participants who were in vulnerable groups or living in shielding households described a heightened fear of contracting the virus, as well as fear of hospital admission for other health conditions. Long periods of shielding constrained people's lives significantly. Official labelling as 'vulnerable' in itself could also cause anxiety and shake confidence.

- Those with caring roles sometimes felt left alone, having to deal with issues without sufficient or appropriate support. The difficulty of finding time out felt like there was no respite from pressures of caring for children in the household or for family members living elsewhere.

- The pandemic and lockdown presented additional challenges for people with existing mental health problems. More generally, there was a concern about the closing down of support groups during the pandemic, and consequences of this for deteriorating mental health.

Across the diaries a wide range of mixed emotions and feelings were evident in people's experiences. Participants referred to anger or tension as they observed events unfolding: *'Feel angry again today. The care home deaths from Covid-19 are now coming out and are still being grossly under-estimated and under reported. It [is] as if these people don't matter!'* (week2-Diary8). While positive views and gratitude was expressed for frontline services and workers, frustrations were evident about the perceived failings of support within some areas: *'many local statutory organisations have failed to respond in any meaningful way. Some of the residents are really angry, but most, sadly, are resigned'* (week 3-Diary11).

Mental health has been affected by the pandemic for a range of reasons

Below, we focus on two key issues identified as having a significant bearing on mental health. (i) social relationships and community connections (ii) the duration of the lockdown.

Social relationships and connections within immediate families and across wider communities affected mental health positively and negatively. At the forefront was the loss of personal and/or physical interaction with family and friends caused by social distancing: *'Our family relationships are very good. However the feelings of loss at not being able to be together physically is profound. We are a big close, family'* (week 1-Diary8). Missing key family events and gatherings caused disappointment and upset as well. *'it's one of my sister's birthday today. I won't see her. It's her job she's a carer and she has to stay clear'* (week 3-Diary13). The situation facing elderly or vulnerable family members generated considerable worry: *'Spoke to dad, not very well today I think he is starting to get depressed'* (week5-Diary9).

The risk of loneliness was also referenced within participants' networks or within the wider community: *'Makes me think about retired people and farmers though the farmers are probably used to it but retired people must be finding it difficult'* (week1-diary4-call).

In contrast, the situation had some unexpected positives. For some, this included spending more time with family members as well as getting to know neighbours. Small acts of kindness were a boost such as a neighbour organising an ice cream van for the street after rules were relaxed. 'Clap for Carers' brought the community together and was another opportunity to connect. *'We all went out and applauded the NHS workers...Had a bit of a chat with a couple of neighbours for the first time in forever'* (week5-Diary3). The way in which communities mobilised within local areas was described as something to be proud of. Participants described how community groups had *'used their initiative to get on with things'* (online workshop, August). An example of such community action is illustrated by this diary entry: *'Have been to one of the community centres today to sort through the food we have there and have donated it all to the food bank rather than it go to waste'* (week5-Diary6)

However, as the lockdown continued week after week, the relentlessness of the situation began to take its toll. One participant described *'hitting a wall'* (week2-Diary1-call) with another explaining: *'Emotionally I feel sometimes that I am fed up with the lock down'* (week 3-Diary2)'. The uncertainty of the situation added to an already stressful situation: *'[it's] hard to be optimistic isn't it when you feel that is indefinite at the moment'* (Week4-Diary14-call).

For those shielding, the prospect of not going out for the foreseeable future was described as *'starting to get me down'* - people are saying it will be July before we can go out - *'that's another 2 months'* (week5-Diary16). Others highlighted the potential challenge of adjusting to life when they did go out again: *'I am now starting to worry … I might not be able to face it at all. A sort of strange phobia of mixing with others'* (week2-Diary 8).

By the final week of the diary study, signs of hope were also evident as participants reflected on their diary keeping over the last 8 weeks. While recognising that considerable challenges remained, it was possible to see a way ahead: *'Still having an impact on mental health but felt more in control than usual. Physically being more active and having things to do has helped…* (week8-Diary14).

Structure and interaction were important in supporting positive mental health

Diaries described numerous examples of coping mechanisms, activities and resources that supported mental health during this difficult and stressful time. This included hobbies and social activities or finding time to unwind, spending time outdoors (e.g. observing nature or gardening), and physical activity including going for walks where this was possible. Social networks – family, friends and volunteering featured frequently as well.

Benefits for emotional wellbeing were described where people participated in opportunities which supported interaction and contributed to a regular structure to the week: *'Positive aspects of week have been participating in zoom calls/ meetings, and also Sunday worship, which took place online* (week2-Diary5). A number of participants were involved with volunteering prior to the pandemic and initially missed seeing their peers when face to face meetings ceased:

"It was really great to see them [fellow volunteers] all again, lifted my spirits no end' (week8-Diary10). *Such interactions offered space to talk to people with 'understanding of your situation'* (week4-Diary14-call).

Another participant who started a volunteer befriending role during lockdown, suggested this provided structure to the day, and positive benefits from the knowledge they were supporting others (week1-Diary1). Finally, continued involvement in ARC_NWC research was reported to bring benefits both for the research and for public advisers involved; providing space for interaction and connection with each other: *'Great to see how everyone is coping and even those that are self-isolating for various reasons are supporting other people, continuing with research projects. It was great for us all to laugh together'* (Week4_Diary9)

What can we learn?

These are just some of the experiences from the Diary study participants, but they contain important messages for understanding how mental health is affected during a pandemic, and what can help:

- The findings add to a growing body of research showing the impact of COVID-19 on mental health now and into the future. They show that the factors influencing mental health are complex and cover a range of issues including direct consequences of life during a pandemic, the effects on social relationships as well as feelings of anger and uncertainty.

- By using diary methods this study was able to offer unique insights into the day to day impacts on mental health over several weeks during a pandemic and how this could fluctuate on a daily basis and over several weeks.

- There is an opportunity to bring together findings from this study and other ARC wide COVID-19 research to provide more detailed insights on mental health and any implications to help inform actions and/or recommendations on supporting mental health and well-being during pandemic situations.

We would like to thank the advisers who participated in the diary study for sharing their insights and experiences of lockdown with us. For more information about the research, please visit the Equitable Place Based Health and Care Theme's webpages or contact the EPHC theme at ephcenquiries@lancaster.ac.uk