

# How the pandemic has affected long-term mental health patients

March 8 2022

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The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected people with long-term mental health issues by damaging or taking away their support structures, new research from the University of Huddersfield has found.

The work of Dr. Dawn Leeming and her colleagues from the School of Human and Health Sciences, published in the *Community Mental Health Journal*, has highlighted how lockdowns and measures to restrict the spread of the virus took vital communications and support away from those struggling with long-term mental [health](#) difficulties.

Their research, based on interviewing 15 people with long-term issues in West Yorkshire, was coordinated with two local charities that have a particular focus on mental health.

## **Lockdowns took valuable support away**

"The question often being asked was 'does the pandemic lead to people becoming more depressed or anxious?', says Dr. Leeming. "We were interested more in the people who were already depressed or anxious, and who were in a routine of accessing [community services](#). We were not necessarily thinking about availability of psychiatric services, crisis or therapy services as they were moved online, more the services that help people to maintain a stability to their lives, a routine and connections with other people. We suspected there might be quite an impact on that kind of support, and that is what we found.

"One participant referred to the 'threads' of recovery being pulled apart by the pandemic. It was a meta threat, not just difficult but actually destabilizing. Some of the people we spoke to already had a recovery structure, and explained how they had learned to manage their difficulties over several years, but the whole thing was threatened by COVID."

The research found that the pandemic could exacerbate inequalities related to employment, education and housing for people with long-term mental health issues. COVID presented a threat, as understood by the concept of '[Power, Threat, Meaning](#)' – the idea that what is often viewed

as a mental health disorder is actually a threat response.

"Threats often arrive through the negative operation of power, in relation to economic inequalities, social strata, physical disability and various other ways people might be disempowered," Dr. Leeming adds.

"Research shows that if people feel that they have limited control, then they are far more likely to experience mental health difficulties.

"What is seen a symptom of illness is often at an attempt to survive in the face of threat. There are common patterns in how people do that, due to evolved histories or social conditioning.

"The pandemic posed a significant threat, so we tried to understand these threats, by trying to look at how being in control, or not, affected people's experiences of the threat. We looked at how they coped with the [threat](#)."

## **Adverse effects of pandemic-induced powerlessness**

Dr. Leeming worked alongside Professor Mike Lucock, Dr. Kagari Shibazaki, Nicki Pilkington and Dr. Becky Scott, who was recently named as a new Voice in Psychology by the British Psychological Society. Becky completed a Ph.D. at Huddersfield last year that explored media representations of people with mental health issues who claim benefits.

"Our key findings were that, whilst many participants were remarkably resilient and drew on years' of experience of managing their mental health difficulties, people still experienced significant threats to their wellbeing in the pandemic, exacerbated by previous powerlessness," Dr. Leeming adds. "It affected them directly and on a day-to-day basis.

"People's vulnerabilities are often misinterpreted as 'they are ill.' That's

not quite right—the vulnerability may be that they are part of marginalized groups, that experience inequalities and their recovery structure has been taken away by the [pandemic](#)."

**More information:** Dawn Leeming et al, The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Those Supported in the Community with Long-Term Mental Health Problems: A Qualitative Analysis of Power, Threat, Meaning and Survival, *Community Mental Health Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10597-021-00932-4](#)

Provided by University of Huddersfield

Citation: How the pandemic has affected long-term mental health patients (2022, March 8) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-pandemic-affected-long-term-mental-health.html>

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