COVID-19 triggers OCD in children and young people
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Many children and young people with obsessive thoughts and compulsions experience that their OCD, anxiety and depressive symptoms worsen during a crisis such as COVID-19. This is shown by a new research result from Aarhus University and the Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Central Denmark Region. The findings have been published in *BMC Psychiatry*.

Trauma and stress can trigger or worsen OCD. Researchers already know this. They have also shown us that COVID-19 may be associated with adults developing psychiatric disorders. But we do not know much about what the corona crisis means for children and young people.

A team of researchers from Aarhus University and the Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Central Denmark Region, therefore decided to examine how children and young people with OCD experience the crisis. Professor, Department Chair Per Hove Thomsen led the research project.

**Condition worsened**

During the spring of 2020, the researchers sent a questionnaire to two groups of children and young people between the ages of seven and 21. One group had been diagnosed with OCD in a specialized OCD section at the Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry—and all had been in contact with a therapist at the hospital. The other group was identified through the Danish OCD Association. The majority of these children and young people had been diagnosed years ago. A total of 102 children responded to the questionnaire.

"Their experience was that their OCD, anxiety and depressive symptoms worsened during a crisis like COVID-19. This worsening was most pronounced for the group identified through the OCD Association," says Per Hove Thomsen.

Almost half of the children and young people who belonged to the first group reported that their symptoms had become worse, while a third of them replied that their anxiety had worsened and a third that their depressive symptoms had worsened. And of these, almost a fifth experienced that both symptoms had got worse. In the other group, 73 per cent reported that their condition had worsened, just over half that their anxiety had worsened, and 43 per cent answered that the depressive symptoms had increased.

**Disinfect and wash hands**

Judith Nissen, who is a consultant, was also one of the driving forces behind the study. She emphasizes that it is no coincidence that the researchers have chosen to study OCD.

"The disorder is particularly interesting to study in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, because OCD is a disorder with many different clinical expressions, including not least health anxiety, fear of bacteria and dirt, and excessive hand washing/use of disinfection. It's therefore important..."
to examine how such a significant crisis can affect
the expression, frequency and progression of the
disorder," she explains.

The children and young people who in the
questionnaire had described thoughts and anxiety
over how something serious could happen, e.g. that
they themselves could become ill or lose family
members, experienced the most significant
worsening of their OCD symptoms. In particular,
children who had begun suffering from OCD at an
early age experienced the most pronounced
worsening.

"For children who are already anxious about loss,
the daily descriptions in the media of illness and
death and recommendations about isolation and
focus on infection can exacerbate these anxious
thoughts, perhaps also especially for the youngest
children, who may have greater difficulty
understanding the significance of the infection, but
who are also very dependent on parents and
grandparents and thus are most vulnerable to loss,"
says Judith Nissen.

On the other hand, there is no correlation with
anxiety about infection and impulsive hand
washing. The study thus indicates that children and
young people with OCD may be vulnerable in
relation to a crisis such as COVID-19, where
anxiety about something serious
happening—including the loss of close
relatives—characterizes a particularly vulnerable
group.

"This may be related to both the direct threat of the
infection and to the consequences of having to
maintain social distancing, social isolation and the
significant level of focus on hygiene. The crisis is
not over yet, and it's therefore very important that
we continue to focus on vulnerable children and
young people in the future," says Judith Nissen.

Provided by Aarhus University

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