

MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS COVID-19 Pandemic

DR TAMU DAVIDSON MD, MPH

HEAD CHRONIC DISEASE AND INJURY - CARPHA



OUTLINE

1. What is Mental Health
2. Arrival of the COVID-19 Pandemic
3. Before COVID-19
4. “The COVID-19 Effect”
5. What are some of the common signs/symptoms of stress in children and adolescents
6. What can be done

What is Mental Health?

“Mental health is a state of mental well-being in which people cope well with the many stresses of life, can realize their own potential, can function productively and fruitfully and are able to contribute to their communities.”

What of Mental Health in childhood

Mental health in childhood means reaching:

- developmental milestones
- emotional milestones
- learning healthy social skills
- how to cope when there are problems

What of Mental Health in childhood?

Mental health disorders in children are generally defined as delays or disruptions in developing age-appropriate:

- thinking
- behaviours
- social skills or regulation of emotions

Arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic..

- On 11 March 2020 - Director-General of the WHO declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19 as pandemic.
- As of July 8, 2020
 - Globally - 11,669,357 confirmed cases and 548,566 death*.
 - Caribbean - 64,590 confirmed cases and 1,340 deaths

*Data Source: CARPHA Infographic No. 14, Situation Report Number 67 July 08, 2020

Before COVID-19.....

- Mental disorders of children and adolescents was major public issue
- Half of all mental health conditions show up by the age of 14 years old
- 10–20% of children and adolescents had a Mental Health problems
- Common conditions include - anxiety disorders, eating disorders, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, substance-use disorders

Arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic..

- Suddenness of the disruption of status quo
 - Isolation and quarantine and restrictions of travel and movement
 - Social distancing, wearing of facial masks
 - a “new normal”
- Uncertainty of who will get it, when it will strike and uncertainty as to when the restrictions will be lifted, and usual activities resumed.
- Confusion because of developing understanding of the way the virus works and therefore how to respond to it
- Feeling of helplessness and loss of reduction of of personal control of freedom.

“The COVID-19 Effect” on children and adolescents

- ✓ Unable to go to school
- ✓ Having adapt to a new way of learning
- ✓ Limitations of online schooling and or no schooling
- ✓ Not able see friends and beloved family members or caregiver for those with disabilities
- ✓ No longer able to move around freely esp. outdoors
- ✓ Cannot go to events or out to eat and shopping
- ✓ Not enough food or access to health foods
- ✓ Little physical activity and weight gain
- ✓ May be living in cramped physical space
- ✓ Increased exposure to increased family dysfunction or violent behaviour
- ✓ Abuse from parent or caregiver
- ✓ Death of a family member without the opportunity to grieve or to say goodbye
- ✓ Stigma and discrimination
- ✓ Family underemployment or unemployment
- ✓ No internet access or poor internet access
- ✓ Disruption of health care and social services
- ✓ Parents not coping or mental health problems

“The COVID-19 Effect” on children and adolescents

Environment

- ✓ No longer able to move around freely especially outdoors.
- ✓ May be living in cramped physical space. (Too much closeness predisposes to competition for attention and use of space)
- ✓ May have less sunlight
- ✓ Disruption of health care and social services

Physical

- ✓ Sub-clinical infection may affect brain health.
- ✓ Too little physical activity from prolonged indoor living (affects mood)
- ✓ Weight gain affects self esteem.
- ✓ Not enough access to food or healthy food due to limited shopping access.

Emotional

- ✓ Missing direct contact with friends and beloved extended family members.
- ✓ Increased exposure to increased family dysfunction or violent behavior. e.g. spouse abuse, drug abuse.
- ✓ abuse by parent or caregiver
- ✓ Death of a family member without the opportunity to grieve or to say goodbye.
- ✓ Stigma and discrimination

Financial/Occupational

- ✓ Family underemployment or unemployment

Intellectual

- ✓ Limitations of online schooling or no schooling at all
- ✓ None or poor internet access
- ✓ Struggle to adapt to the discipline of online schooling
- ✓ Frustration at underachievement due to limited options to address learning styles.

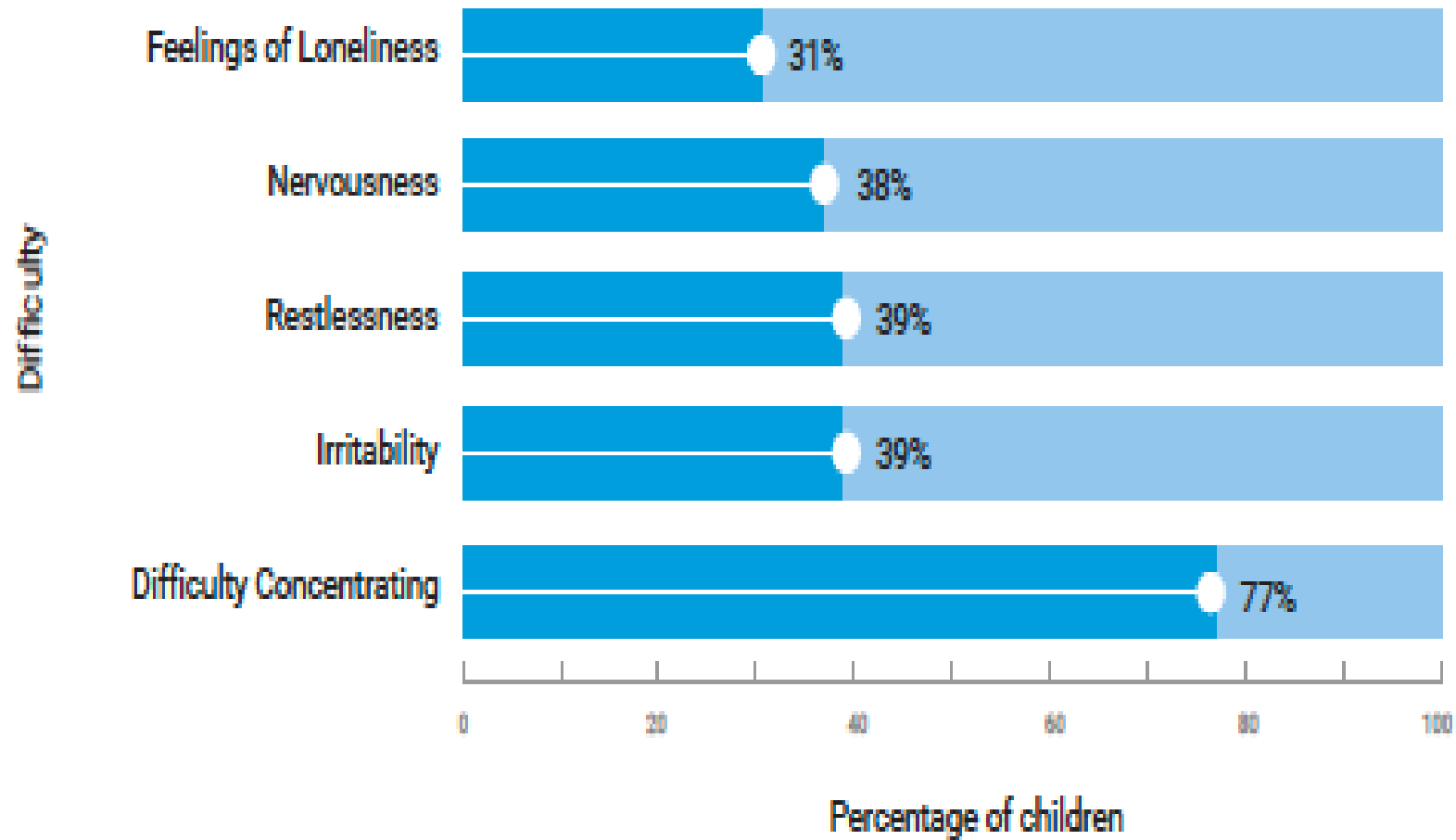
“The COVID-19 Effect”

1. Children and adolescents with no mental problems may be less able to cope due to the various stressors.
2. Exacerbation of existing mental health condition

What are some of the common signs/symptoms of stress in children and adolescents?

- ✓ Perform poorly in schoolwork
- ✓ Withdrawal and isolation
- ✓ Difficulty concentrating
- ✓ Increased worries or inability to focus
- ✓ frequent complaints of physical symptoms (e.g. headaches and stomachaches)
- ✓ Sleeping too much or too little
- ✓ Nightmares or sleepwalking
- ✓ Problems with appetite
- ✓ behaviours returning to those of a younger age e.g. like bedwetting, throwing tantrums, or becoming clingy
- ✓ Non-compliant or aggressive behaviors
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Increase in risk-taking behaviors and/or showing less concern for their own safety e.g. physical altercations or playing with unsafe items.

Parents' reports of children's difficulties during COVID-19 confinement (Italy and Spain)



Source: United Nations May 2020. Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health

What can be done....

- **Governments**

- ✓ Integrate mental health and psychosocial support interventions for children and adolescents into national plans not only in the health sector but across all sectors.
- ✓ Provide mental health services as an essential health service including tele/phone services
- ✓ Implement protective measures to reduce the risk factors for mental health problems and persons with mental health conditions
- ✓ Public education to raise awareness about mental health needs for children and adolescents
- ✓ Communicate COVID-19 messages that promote and support mental health and well-being

- **NGO/Civil Society/Faith-based Organisations**

- ✓ Advocacy to raise awareness about mental health issues in children and adolescents and protection of rights.
- ✓ Provide supportive social services for children and adolescents including parents/caregivers e.g. access to food
- ✓ Promote support for parents and caregivers

What can be done....

- **Healthcare professionals**

- ✓ Screening for mental health problems in adolescents and children and treat appropriately
- ✓ Provide support for parents and caregivers

- **Teachers/Educators/School administrators:**

- ✓ Create supportive environment of children and adolescents
- ✓ Work with families and healthcare professionals if you have concerns about the mental health of a child in your school.

- **Parents/caregivers**

- ✓ Practice self-care and seek help
- ✓ Look out for signs of stress in their child/adolescent and seek help
- ✓ Talk with children, create routine schedules, monitor exposure to information online, radio and T.V.

The failure to address mental health problems in children and adolescents can have long lasting effects beyond childhood and adolescence.

VOICE OF A CHILD...

“Not scared if I stay at home it cannot get me.”

“I like staying at home.....I have an excuse for everything if I do not want to do it.”

Abigail Alcock 10 years old