

The Pandemic Did Not Affect Mental Health the Way You Think

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You've probably heard that the coronavirus pandemic triggered a worldwide mental-health crisis. This narrative took hold almost as quickly as the virus itself. In the spring of 2020, [article](#) after [article](#)—even [an op-ed](#) by one of us—warned of a looming psychological epidemic. As clinical scientists and research psychologists have [pointed out](#), the coronavirus pandemic has created many conditions that might lead to psychological distress: sudden, widespread disruptions to people's livelihoods and social connections; millions bereaved; and the most vulnerable subjected to long-lasting hardship. A global collapse in well-being has seemed inevitable.

We joined a [mental-health task force](#), commissioned by *The Lancet*, in order to quantify the pandemic's psychological effects. When we reviewed the best available data, we saw that some groups—including people facing financial stress—have experienced substantial, life-changing suffering. However, looking at the global population on the whole, we were surprised not to find the prolonged misery we had expected.

We combed through close to 1,000 studies that examined hundreds of thousands of people from nearly 100 countries. This research measured many variables related to mental health—including anxiety, depression, and deaths by suicide—as well as life satisfaction. We focused on two complementary types of evidence: surveys that examined comparable groups of people before and during the pandemic and studies tracking the same individuals over time. Neither type of study is perfect, but when the same conclusions emerged from both sets of evidence, we gained confidence that we were seeing something real.

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