



FIVE QUESTIONS

ON MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

FOR TANIA SINGER

Ms. Singer, lockdowns turn everyday life completely upside down. How did people living in Berlin experience the contact restrictions in 2020 and 2021?

82 TANIA SINGER There was a significant decline in mental health during the first lockdown in March 2020: more people suffered everything from anxiety, stress and loneliness to depression. Following this shock effect, people then recovered a little as restrictions were eased during the summer. However, during the second, even longer lockdown the usual resilience of Berliners once again declined steadily from month to month. They were unable to resort to coping strategies because the social contacts necessary for these to be effective were severely restricted, which resulted in a significant fatigue effect in the winter of 2020/2021.

Which groups were most affected?

Predominantly the 18 to 25-year-olds and women in general suffered a lot due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first lockdown had already weakened their resilience, after which the downward spiral started all over again and things gradually went downhill. Resilience can often be restored through social contacts and by getting together with other people, but the two lockdowns imposed severe limitations on these options.

How did you discover this?

In the CovSocial project, we studied not only mental health and resilience, but also

social cohesion, which is observable in such things as the trust we place in others in social networks and personal encounters. Our observation period extended from the first lockdown in the spring of 2020 through the easing of restrictions in June to the second, longer lockdown in the fall of 2020 and winter of 2021. We mailed invitations requesting participation in the project to a random selection of Berliners aged between 18 and 65 and also advertised it on posters in the subway.

And then the project was divided into exactly two phases, right?

Exactly! Phase one involved an online survey in which we asked ‘How are you?’, ‘How did you experience the pandemic and the various associated contact restrictions?’. In combination with stress hormone measurements that we took, this resulted in the analysis of the respective participant’s current state. In phase two, which is ongoing, we want to offer people help with dealing with the increased stress levels and loneliness by hosting online mental training courses involving short daily exercises, which are designed to actively point out potential ways out of isolation, for example, with the aid of the CovSocial app. During this phase, we will continue to measure participants’ stress hormone levels and conduct surveys on such things as their levels of compassion and empathy, and on parameters for mental health. This will tell us what has changed in relation to the first phase and whether people are feeling any better after the training.

What social changes were you able to observe within the community?

Social cohesion, i.e., the sense of belonging to certain groups – actually more an economic and political construct than anything else – suffered immensely during the second lockdown. The macroscopic social fabric is beginning to fray, and solidarity with others is decreasing, which means that contact restrictions also have a significant effect on socially relevant variables. This is something that the government ought to bear in mind when considering any further lockdowns, as it is likely that every new lockdown will lead to even greater fatigue. In other words, society is becoming increasingly vulnerable and resilience is continuing to decline. If depression and loneliness are on the increase among adolescents, who are at an age at which the brain is still very malleable, then the situation is extremely serious in terms of mental illness and suicidal ideation. While it may not be as immediately evident as a COVID-19 infection, it’s still a huge problem. Our goal is to identify people who are particularly vulnerable, in order to provide them with better support and assistance in their daily lives.

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 www.mpg.de/podcasts/pandemie-psychische-gesundheit (in German)