

Young people and COVID-19: emerging mental health concerns

In his recent article, Ashton touches upon the mental health effects of COVID-19.¹ What he fails to do, however, is to elaborate on the effects COVID-19 has had on young people's mental health and their families. The NHS has underfunded children and young people's mental health services for years. Mental health problems develop early, and half of all mental health problems begin by 14 years of age, and three-quarters by 25 years.² Early detection and intervention is therefore imperative in preventing mental illness persisting into adulthood.

The NHS Long Term Plan commits to the expansion of Community and Adolescent Mental Health Services and specialist eating disorder services which should improve access to specialist care for young people, but strict referral criteria and long waiting times for appointments need to be addressed.² COVID-19 has brought numerous challenges for young people and their families: closures of schools, reduced contact with peers, academic stress, exposure to potential harm in homes, and the fear and anxiety of contracting and transmitting COVID-19.

The mental health consequences of COVID-19 for young people at present are not conclusive, but there are concerning features such as an increase in depressive symptoms and social isolation, especially in families already struggling.³ Many young people will have psychologically been affected by the COVID-19-induced morbidity and mortality, insecurity and financial difficulties. Even though young

people may soon be vaccinated, and restrictions are currently being lifted, we are still far from eradicating COVID-19, and the winter looms with threats of new mutant COVID-19 strains and possible further morbidity and national lockdowns. As we move into an uncertain future, young people must be at the fore of timely access and provision of mental health support and care, in the recovery and rehabilitation from COVID-19.

Declarations

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ORCID iDs

Faraz Mughal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5437-5962>

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Faraz Mughal

School of Medicine, Keele University, Keele ST5 5BG, UK
Email: f.mughal@keele.ac.uk