

Impact of COVID-19 on Relationships in the Disability Community: Facts and Resources

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Introduction

While already facing multiple barriers within society, including inaccessible environments, stigma and biases, political challenges, etc., individuals with intellectual and /or developmental disabilities (I/DD) have been adversely impacted by COVID-19. The pandemic has placed the I/DD population at an extreme social disadvantage (Constantino et al., 2020). The recommended physical distancing has intensified the community's feelings of isolation and psychological distress, ultimately resulting in worsening mental health conditions, mood swings, and sleep disruptions (for which population according to APA? I/DD or general population (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Mental Health Challenges

Specifically, those with intellectual and developmental disabilities are experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety due to fear of being unable to seek proper medical care if infected (Courtenay & Perera, 2020). In addition to experiencing this fear, many individuals with I/DD (particularly those with autism and obsessive compulsive disorders) have been exhibiting excessive levels of paranoid thinking regarding information related to COVID-19, which can lead to problem behaviors such as scrupulous personal hygiene (Courtenay & Perera, 2020). Individuals with I/DD who are also diagnosed with disorders such as ADHD or autism are facing additional mental health challenges as their normal daily routines cannot be carried out due to restrictions on their physical environments (Narzisi, 2020). Increase in behavior problems may arise or persist because of additional challenges they may experience when attempting to adapt to new social settings (Courtenay & Perera, 2020).

Social Isolation

According to Euseibo (2020), many individuals with I/DD are experiencing decreased independence due to being unable to participate in their usual activities where socialization typically occurs, such as day programs, jobs, libraries, churches, etc., which allowed those with I/DD to connect and interact with one another. Additionally, students with I/DD are now struggling with remote schooling because of a lack of adequate accommodations and needed individualized supports (The Arc, 2020). These closings have also led to loss of employment, and the switch to virtual academic services have forced individuals with I/DD to spend an increased amount of time in their homes, leading to increase in isolation from their communities (The Arc, 2020).

Strain on Familial Relationships

For parents of children with I/DD, the pandemic has created additional challenges due to increased caregiver burden (Russell et al., 2020), lack of social support (Neece et al., 2020), and perceived stress of their children (Russell et al., 2020). Recent research has also predicted that

the adjustment siblings of individuals with I/DD are facing due to COVID-19 is increasing their stress levels,. For example, many siblings have taken on a caretaker role to mitigate the strain that their parents are under and are therefore experiencing more feelings of distress (Plante, 2020). The many hardships that parents and siblings of individuals with I/DD are now experiencing can negatively influence their familial bonds.

Increased Violence and Abuse

COVID-19 may also be contributing to a higher risk of domestic violence and child abuse among the I/DD population as methods of clinical assessment of safety has changed (Courtenay & Perera, 2020). Unfortunately, the pandemic has forced individuals with disabilities to have limited social interaction and this places survivors of abuse in circumstances that can foster further abuse (Center on Victimization and Safety, 2021). In addition, many countries have reported a significant increase in the number of domestic abuse incidents, as well as an increased demand for services to support individuals experiencing this form of violence (Usher et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Even though the social and psychological consequences for individuals with I/DD during this pandemic have been drastic, progress is being made, and healthier outcomes will continue to be achieved through effective advocacy efforts and collaboration. For example, many national, state, local, and international agencies and organizations have begun implementing webinars, virtual zoom events, counseling services, and more in order to assist individuals with I/DD during this challenging times. Below are some helpful resources.

Resources

American Psychological Association: Provides advice for caretakers of children with disabilities during COVID-19. <https://www.apa.org/research/action/children-disabilities-covid-19>

Association of University Centers on Disabilities: Created a 4-part webinar series reviewing what is currently known about disability inclusion as it relates to COVID-19. https://www.aucd.org/template/news.cfm?news_id=14624&parent=16&parent_title=Home&url=/template/index.cfm

Best Buddies of Maryland: Hosts virtual events each week on Zoom that are a perfect opportunity to socialize and form connections with peers. <https://www.bestbuddies.org/maryland/events-calendar/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Provides resources that may assist one in creating and using inclusion strategies to improve the health, well-being, and participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability-resources.html>

Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Housing Task Force: “Works with Congress and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to increase access to decent, safe and affordable housing for all people with disabilities and to protect the rights guaranteed under the Fair Housing Act.” http://www.c-c-d.org/rubriques.php?rub=taskforce.php&id_task=8

Council for Exceptional Children: An international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of children and youth with disabilities. The website provides many resources for health care professionals. <https://exceptionalchildren.org/about-us>

Parent to Parent USA: Organization that will match parents with a child who has a special healthcare need with one another. This creates an opportunity for increased social support and meaningful relationships. <https://www.p2pusa.org/parents/>

Pro Bono Counseling Project: Offers free counseling and therapy to individuals, families, and couples in Maryland for those with limited resources. <https://probonocounseling.org>

Resource Finder at Kennedy Krieger: Provides families with information and connections regarding any community services and programs they require within their area. <https://www.kennedykrieger.org/community/initiatives/resource-finder>

The Parents’ Place of Maryland: Dedicated to COVID-19 issues affecting children and young adults with disabilities. The many resources it provides include information on self-care, getting the COVID-19 vaccine, coping in the 2020-2021 school year, and more! https://www.ppmmd.org/resource_category/covid-19-issues/

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