



Changes in patient behavior during COVID-19: What I've observed

Dmitry Arbuck, MD

Dr. Arbuck is President and Medical Director, Indiana Polyclinic, Indianapolis, Indiana, He is an Associate Editor of CURRENT PSYCHIATRY.

Disclosure

The author reports no financial relationships with any companies whose products are mentioned in this article, or with manufacturers of competing products.

nprecedented circumstances, extraordinary times, continental shift, lifealtering experience—the descriptions of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have been endless, and accurate. Every clinician who has cared for patients during these trying times has noticed new patterns in patient behavior. Psychiatrists are acutely aware of the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive methods that patients are using to protect themselves from the chaos around them, and the ways in which they process a societal catastrophe such as COVID-19 (Figure, page 47). Here are some new patterns I have noticed among my own patients.

Physical and emotional separation

I first noticed the changes in my patients' behavior at the front desk, where they now spend less time talking with the staff. They bring their own pens for filling out the paperwork, avoid touching items around them, and try to keep social interactions brief and to the point. Patients have been more cooperative about scheduling and rescheduling their appointments. They have generally been nicer to the staff, frequently thanking us for the work we do, and verbalizing their support for health care professionals in general.

Patients have been more supportive of their family members and other patients in the clinic, with some noticeable exceptions, such as maintaining social distancing for their own comfort and safety. Some patients wear face masks not just for safety but also to separate themselves and hide their emotions from the world. This allows them to feel more emotionally secure when interacting with other people.

The use of telehealth has given many patients the security of not having to leave their home, and the decreased need for travel adds to their comfort.

Changes I didn't expect

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in some unexpected changes in my patients. Only a minority of my patients have expressed increased anxiety, while most have become less anxious overall on issues other than the pandemic. Many of my patients who have stressful jobs, especially teachers, say they feel more comfortable working from home and have less anxiety and depression because they are removed from their daily stressors. There also has been an increase in patients' use of humor, including inappropriate humor, to defend against their fear of COVID-19.

Our clinic is a multidisciplinary facility that specializes in integrating mental and physical health treatments for pain, and for some patients, increased anxiety is clearly associated with an increase in pain. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, patients have recognized this connection and verbalized their concerns.

Every issue of Current Psychiatry has its 'Pearls'

Yours could be found here.

Read the 'Pearls' guidelines for manuscript submission at MDedge.com/ CurrentPsychiatry/page/pearls. Then, share with your peers a 'Pearl' of wisdom from your practice.



Figure

Mistrust

Personal stages of societal catastrophe

and denial News is seen as fake, too much to

- believe in and not worthy News is not
- applicable to own reality
- Pity toward people who ruminate on the news
- Mild compassion toward potential victims of current events
- Sense of own security

Fear and panic

- Insatiable consumption of bad news and drive to share it
 - Unstoppable hoarding of items thought as needed for survival
 - Sense of impending doom and exaggerated fear of unknown
 - Sense of profound insecurity
 - Sense of staged reality and not belonging to reality
- Anger toward people who do not understand the gravity of events

Coping and

- Excessive use of
 - Learning new skills for protection and

 - Efforts to assist
- build better future for self and others
- Paying attention to taking active steps to have joy

Maturity and balance

- · Belonging to a group of like-minded people
- Focusing on the future while remembering the past
 - Supporting individuals with emotional and physical scars
 - Constructive planning for possible recurrence of problems
 - Rewarding self and others for their achievements
- Remembering lessons and teaching others
- Avoiding extremes and staying balanced
- Knowing own worth and being critical of own mistakes

Resolution

- · Moving on to establish new life patterns
 - Recognizing that prevention of problems should never stop
 - Returning to normal relationships and building new ones
 - · Understanding that all problems can be solved
 - Remembering traumatic experience without overemphasis
 - · Seeing future for what it is without over- or
 - underemphasizing it Taking care of self
- and others · Belonging to a
- community · Having a full appreciation of life

Source: Copyright © 2020 Indiana Polyclinic, PC, All rights reserved.

Some somatic patients have had a decrease in their physical symptoms, including chronic pain, because they see that the whole world is not well, which somehow helps to validate their concerns.

The changes in our patients' psychological well-being will likely continue to morph as we enter a more stable period. The eventual resolution of the pandemic will bring further changes to our patients' emotional lives. As we go through these times together, we will continue to uncover new ways that our patients will use to defend themselves against stress and adversities.