

Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy

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Online First Publication, June 11, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000694>

CITATION

Nguyen, T. H. D., & Vu, D. C. (2020, June 11). Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic Upon Mental Health: Perspectives From Vietnam. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000694>

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic Upon Mental Health: Perspectives From Vietnam

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Similar to other nations in the world, Vietnam has swiftly implemented measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, and these have been transforming many aspects of society. The country is showing resilience to fear, stress, and anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Vietnam, social distancing, mental health

The COVID-19 Situation in Vietnam

As of April 24, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has spread to 210 countries and territories, infecting more than 2.7 million people and claiming 194,000 lives (Worldometers, 2020). Vietnam, sharing a long land border and having a large volume of trade with China, has so far recorded no deaths due to COVID-19 and just 270 infected cases since the first case was announced on January 23. Overall, nearly half of the positive cases (49%) have been observed for the young (Aged 21–40). Approximately 60% of infections have been acquired overseas. Currently, the country has not recorded any new positive cases over the last 6 days.

Vietnam's Response


As a precaution against the spread of the disease, Vietnam swiftly took actions with a variety of preventive and control measures, including shutdown of schools, language centers, and other nonessential services and businesses. This pandemic-driven shutdown is clearly affecting segments of the population differently. Language teachers are experiencing financial burden as no classes due to the school closure are tantamount to no income for them to pay expenses such as rent, water, electricity, and food. Along these lines, the COVID-19 situation is taking a toll on foreign nationals' mental health who have arrived in Vietnam for teaching languages. Similar to many parts of the world, moving

education systems online to maintain continuity of teaching and learning flourishes in Vietnam. Nevertheless, this model helps provide part of the financial support for a limited number of the language teachers affected by the pandemic fallout.

Perhaps, lottery ticket sellers are the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 outbreak as Vietnam has suspended all lottery-related activities to slow the spread of the new coronavirus since April 1 (Anh Minh, 2020). Unlike the distribution of lotteries in other countries, such as the United States, lottery tickets in Vietnam are wholesaled to local lottery agents who then sell the tickets to lottery ticket sellers. These individual sellers move around the streets daily in the hope of selling all the tickets (about 200) until expiration by 4 p.m., earning US\$ 4.3 per ticket. These people often have trivial savings and spend the money earned each day to feed their families (Manh Hoa, 2020). Consequently, the lottery suspension in response to the COVID-19 outbreak causes panic and anxiety among people living on daily lottery ticket sales. Local governments, such as the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs, plan to financially support lottery ticket sellers via monthly relief payments of US\$ 42 for 3 months, starting in April (Manh Hoa, 2020). It is important to note that the COVID-19 outbreak has prompted people all over Vietnam to help those less fortunate. For example, more than 24 "rice ATMs" (automatic dispensing machines providing free rice), invented and operated by entrepreneurs, have been set up in several cities across the country to help people out of work following the nationwide social distancing measures (Lee, 2020). Such machines are not only giving out food but also dispensing hope to the poor in Vietnam.

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak, misinformation and fake news inundating social media platforms have sparked coronavirus fears locally and globally. In Vietnam, rumors, such as lockdowns of entire cities, COVID-19 deaths, or shortages of face masks or food, spread on social media networks are serious public concerns (Pham, 2020). These have inflamed the COVID-19 panic and confusion, stockpiling of foods and essential supplies, and people rushing to pharmacies for face mask purchases. At the early phase of the outbreak, the Vietnamese Prime Minister has signed a decree stipulating sanctions against those disseminating fake news and misinformation on social media. Accordingly, a fine of

Editor's Note. This commentary received rapid review due to the time-sensitive nature of the content. It was reviewed by the special section guest editors and the journal Editor.—KKT

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US\$ 430–870 can be imposed on individuals taking advantage of social networks to share untruthful, harmful news that provokes public panic (Phuong Linh, 2020).

During the pandemic, outpatients who need to visit clinics are among the most vulnerable populations. Health care-acquired infection has recently drawn public concerns in Vietnam since a large hospital in the country's capital became a hotspot of COVID-19 (T. H. D. Nguyen & Vu, 2020). This can cause panic and anxiety which could further exacerbate the outpatients' health vulnerabilities. To minimize the exposure to infection sources, telehealth platforms, such as Teleconsultation, have been introduced in many health care facilities in April.

A very recent study on 4,029 Vietnamese outpatients has shown that people suspected of having COVID-19 symptoms were associated with a greater tendency toward depression and had lower health-related quality of life than those not suspected of having COVID-19 (H. C. Nguyen et al., 2020). This indicates that COVID-19, for which both no vaccine and no approved drugs are currently available, may cause depression for suspected COVID-19 patients. Nevertheless, health literacy has the potential to benefit mental health and quality of life amid the outbreak. People are encouraged to watch health-related TV programs, ask health-related questions, read official newspapers, know their medical history, and provide their accurate health information to improve individual health literacy.

In general, the citizen's spontaneous actions have swiftly been taken and are proving helpful to ease difficulties and tackle mental health problems caused by the pandemic. While the government's preventive and control measures have been effective in the fight against COVID-19, there is a lack of comprehensiveness of the measures in response to the pandemic. For example, the shutdown of activities related to the lottery was announced while financial support to those affected was delayed, leading to anxiety among lottery ticket salespersons.

Health Care

In response to the pandemic, the government rapidly converted student dormitories, army camps, and makeshift hospitals into quarantine zones for suspected COVID-19 cases and new arrivals. This is considered a comparatively affordable and effective approach. Vietnam's officials have also sought to test anyone who could have been exposed to the infection. With more than 110 laboratories capable of diagnosing the novel coronavirus using real-time polymerase chain reaction technology, Vietnam is currently able to conduct 13,000 tests per day. The country also imports rapid test kits which are used for testing tens of thousands of people in centralized quarantine zones, under self-quarantine, outpatients at hospitals, and new arrivals at the airports.

During the pandemic, the country provides centralized quarantine of all people in the country and COVID-19 treatment of Vietnam citizens free of charge. More makeshift hospitals have been constructed to alleviate the burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, telemedicine platforms have been launched to minimize the exposure to infection sources.

Conclusion

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic particularly causes panic and anxiety among lottery ticket sellers and foreign language teachers. The voluntary contributions of the Vietnamese people have swiftly helped allay difficulties and tackle mental health problems caused by the pandemic.

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Received April 24, 2020

Revision received May 14, 2020

Accepted May 18, 2020 ■