

NIHR Greater Manchester PSTRC

Plain English Publication Summary

Publication: [The association between COVID-19-related fear and reported self-harm in a national survey of people with a lifetime history of self-harm](#)

Publication details (Vancouver format)

Keyworth C, Quinlivan L, Leather J, O'Connor R, Armitage C. The association between COVID-19-related fear and reported self-harm in a national survey of people with a lifetime history of self-harm. BMC Psychiatry. 2022; 22 (1).Doi: 10.1186/s12888-021-03625-0

What are the most important findings/conclusions in this paper? Why are they important?

Fear of COVID-19 was linked with a greater risk of suicidal thoughts and self-harm. For people who had hurt themselves previously, fear of the disease was linked to a 22% increase in suicidal thoughts.

The results show the impact COVID-19 may have had on people, and highlights an opportunity to help people with a history of self-harm. This is important for healthcare professionals to consider when supporting patients that have self-harmed in the past. If fear of COVID-19 is used alongside age and gender as a way of working out risk, there could be an opportunity to improve outcomes for people with a history of harming themselves.

What did you do?

We collected data from over 1,000 UK adults who had a history of self-harm through an online survey in June 2020, about a month after the end of the first full UK lockdown. First, the survey asked people about their history of self-harming, having suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts. Second, we asked whether any of their close family or friends had died, ever self-harmed, or died by suicide. Third, we asked people whether or not they had caught COVID-19, and to tell us how afraid they felt about COVID-19.

Why did you conduct this research?

Little is known about the impact of COVID-19 on people with a history of self-harm. Our research aimed to find out if fear of COVID-19 could be a risk factor for suicidal thoughts and self-harm among members of the UK public who have previously self-harmed.

What was known before your paper was published?

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on mental health. Researchers were concerned that the measures used to reduce the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns, physical distancing, and self-isolation, may have caused more people to have suicidal thoughts. This is because many of the challenges caused by the measures (for example: disrupted mental health services or long periods of isolation), are linked with higher rates of self-harm and suicide. Existing studies had only used general measures of fear and anxiety which didn't specifically measure fear linked to COVID-19.

What is next? What is the potential impact of the work in this paper? What will change as a result of this paper (or the study it describes)?

Although the survey took place in 2020, the findings give important information about the behaviours of people with a history of harming themselves during the UK lockdowns. Future research could focus on whether reducing fear of COVID-19 helps to decrease suicidal thoughts for people with a history of self-harm.

There is also a need to better understand the role that COVID-19 fear has played for people with a history of self-harm. This includes looking at how the disease has caused disruption to mental health services, job insecurity, economic uncertainty, and how it has contributed to loneliness and isolation.

Does this paper link in to a particular study / project? If so, please summarise the study and explain how this paper has improved understanding, or will move the study forward.

N/A