

Beyond dis-ease and dis-order

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Perhaps the best way to illustrate the relevance and impact of the work presented in this dissertation, is by connecting its findings to the global situation we find ourselves currently faced with.

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new coronavirus disease, termed COVID-19, to be a 'Public health emergency of international concern'.¹ Consequently, severe measures were taken all around the globe in an attempt to stop the virus from spreading. Entire nations were forced to stay home, close their businesses, and keep distance from one another, which, inevitably had enormous impact on the daily lives of people. Given all these measures, as well as the elevated levels of fear, worry and concern directly or indirectly caused by the pandemic, it was only a matter of time for the 'second pandemic' to arise. Namely, the pandemic of impaired mental health.² Being aware of the psychosocial impact of COVID-19, the WHO started to communicate about mental health concerns already shortly after declaring the health emergency in January, expecting levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviors to rise.³ They furthermore wrote on their website: "*Fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, and at times when we are faced with uncertainty or the unknown. So it is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.*"⁴

Indeed, it can be considered normal and understandable that people experience fear and stress in the context of a pandemic, which, arguably, is best considered a huge biopsychosocial stressor that, additionally, involves a high degree of uncertainty and uncontrollability - aspects known to hold the potential to significantly impact on health and well-being. More specifically, on the health and well-being of individuals who are already vulnerable to the impact of stress and thus most likely to suffer adverse consequences. Based on the work presented in this dissertation, I argue that it may very well be that people who have been exposed to traumatic or toxic stress (early) in their lives, are the ones most threatened by the stressful circumstances we are faced with today. They are threatened both directly and indirectly, thus vulnerable to the stressors related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to other daily life stressors that may be considered minor or irrelevant to many, yet can nevertheless be very distressing to some.

With respect to the above, perhaps one of the most important implications of this dissertation, is that it stresses the notion that the so called 'vulnerable groups' often referred to in the media, are not limited to those of old age, or those in poor physical health, but moreover include people with a history of childhood adversity, and adversity in general. Thus, I argue that in societies where people are continuously and sometimes chronically exposed to some level of stress, as is for instance the case in the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is of utmost importance to expand our knowledge and understanding of the consequences of stress on health and well-being, as well as identifying the people who are most vulnerable to bear these consequences. This is necessary to prevent subsequent suffering, and to be able to respond effectively once damage is done to the brain, mind, and body.

By exploring the long-lasting impact of childhood adversity in a general population, and, moreover, by shining light on the complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social dimensions that are known to influence all aspects of human life, this dissertation aimed to do exactly that: expand our knowledge and understanding of the long-lasting consequences of (early life) stress on health in general, and mental health more specifically. The findings and subsequent recommendations presented here are thus considered to be highly relevant on a societal level, but perhaps even more so on the individual level of people who have endured childhood adversity themselves, and who are still suffering from the consequences up until today.

In conclusion, it is my deepest wish that the work in this dissertation encourages people to always look behind the surface and to start seeing beyond dis-order and dis-ease by investigating what their past may have to do with their present, and what steps there are to take to build a brighter future. If it accomplishes this, even if for one individual, I consider my work impactful.



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