

Commentary

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-harm and self-harm/suicide ideation: population wide, data linkage study and time series analysis: Commentary, Patra et al

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The commentary raises important points like patients' actual availability of out- or in-patient services in the wake of pandemics and nationwide lockdowns. The focus is also drawn to missed opportunities to include data from hotlines and online services, a possible increase in death by suicides or changes in the factors that could add up to or protect a person from suicide.

Keywords

Suicide; self-harm; COVID-19; suicide prevention.

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Response

We read with interest the research paper by Paterson et al (2023)¹ who have wonderfully used the autoregressive integrated moving average to come up with this study measuring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-harm and self-harm/suicidal ideation. Their work is extensive and takes into account nine long years of data, which is commendable. The researchers have also managed to provide data of individuals across multiple demographics, which makes this study unique and impactful. However, upon reading, there were a few limitations to the study that come to one's mind. They are listed as follows.

The study notes how there is an overall decrease in the number of people who presented with self-harm or ideations during the pandemic; however, one is forced to think about if there was an actual drop in the numbers or were people not availing themselves of these services due to nation-wide lockdowns. This can also be noted from the fact that data was collected through the NIRSH (Northern Ireland Registry of Self-Harm), which contains information of people presenting 'physically' at hospital emergency departments. These numbers could have naturally been low given the norms around social distancing and stay-at-home guidelines.²

Along the same lines, the question of whether data was collected from other self-harm resources and helplines is raised; specifically helplines that are available online or on-call, which would've been more accessible given the situation of a nation-wide lockdown. Based on reports by the Samaritans, a registered charity providing emotional support during crisis, there was an increase of 23% in people reaching out to them for their services over email and an increase of 12% was observed on phone calls they received.³ Shout, a text-based mental health service, also noticed an increase in texts related to self-harm.⁴

A lesser number of people showing up to the emergency department could indicate an increase in deaths by suicide which have not been accounted for in the study. Consequently, it is also important to scrutinize the title of the study, which quotes 'impact of the COVID-19 pandemic' on self-harm, because we cannot say for sure that it was owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or the quarantine that the rates of self-harm or suicidal ideations were found to be lower than expected.

The fact that nation-wide lockdowns were in place meant that individuals were at home with other individuals. Due to restriction of movements, individuals with suicidal ideation might have been

subjected to more supervision/scrutiny, which could have been a protective factor. Self-harm and suicide is a public health issue which means it can go way beyond just the basic demographics of an individual. Things that could have been considered other than existing demographics would be existing mental health issues, concerns and treatments.

The opportunity to seek out help when going through a dull phase is a privilege that a lot of people may not have had during the initial days of pandemic when focus was completely on staying safe and simply surviving.

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Data availability

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Author contributions

A.P. and B.N.P.: conceptualisation. A.P.: first draft of manuscript. B.N.P.: review and editing. B.N.P. and A.P.: final approval of the manuscript.

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Declaration of interest

None.

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Reflection

The dance of imperfection

Antonio Yaghy 

The first tic arrived like an unexpected guest, a gentle flutter in my left eye that seemed harmless enough. I was nine, still young enough to find humour in my body's strange new choreography. But like rings in still water, the movements spread – a shoulder shrug here, a throat clearing there, each new tic adding its voice to an orchestra I never chose to conduct.

Living with Tourette's is like hosting a revolution in your own body, where muscles stage tiny protests without warning or permission. Each day begins as a negotiation with an unseen force that speaks through sudden jerks and sounds, a language of interruption that demands to be heard. In school, I became a master of misdirection, transforming neck twitches into casual stretches, disguising vocal tics as coughs or clearing my throat. My body was a constant betrayal, but my mind grew sharp with the art of adaptation. The stares came first, then the whispers, then the well-meaning but exhausting questions. 'Can't you just stop?' they'd ask, as if I hadn't spent countless nights wondering the same thing. Explaining Tourette's to others is like describing colours to someone who sees in grayscale – the complexity of it, the way it weaves itself into every moment, defies simple translation. Some days the tics are a gentle tide, barely noticeable in their ebb and flow. Other days they're a tsunami, overwhelming in their intensity, leaving me drained and aching from the effort of existing in a body that won't be still.

Yet in this dance with disorder, I've discovered an unexpected grace. My Tourette's has taught me patience not as a virtue but as a survival skill. It has shown me that control is often an illusion, that true strength lies not in suppression but in acceptance. I've learned to find humour in the unpredictable – like the time my shoulder tic perfectly punctuated the punchline of a joke, or when a sudden vocal tic harmonised with a street musician's song. The syndrome has gifted me with a peculiar kind of wisdom: that our bodies, with all their quirks and rebellions, are not our enemies but our most persistent teachers. Each tic is a reminder that perfection is a myth, that humanity is found in our glitches and gaps. In meetings, classrooms or quiet cafes, my Tourette's announces itself without apology, and I've learned to do the same. This is not resignation but revolution – choosing to occupy space unapologetically in a world that often demands stillness. What many don't understand is that Tourette's isn't just about the visible tics; it's about the invisible strength required to face each day knowing your body might betray you at any moment. It's about finding beauty in imperfection, about redefining what it means to be in control. I've learned to see my tics not as interruptions of life but as part of its texture, like the grain in wood or the ripples in water. Now, when I catch my reflection mid-tic, I no longer see disorder. I see resilience embodied, grace in motion, the strange poetry of a body writing its own rules. My Tourette's is not just a condition to be managed but a lens through which I've learned to view the world – a world where perfection is less interesting than authenticity, where strength is measured not by stillness but by the courage to keep moving forwards, even when the path trembles beneath your feet.

In the end, Tourette's has taught me that our challenges don't define us, but they do refine us. Each tic, each twitch, each unexpected sound has carved me into someone more compassionate, more adaptable, more alive to the beautiful complexity of being human. And in those rare moments of stillness, when the tics subside like waves after a storm, I find myself grateful for this dance of imperfection – this persistent, unscripted choreography that has shown me the profound strength we all carry within.

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