

Press Release

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: COVID-19 May Have A Negative Impact on Cognitive Abilities

A peer reviewed publication maintains stress from the COVID-19 pandemic may have had a negative impact on cognitive abilities and risk perception among the general public, according to a study conducted by researchers at McGill University in Canada.

The impact of stress and of worry on cognitive function are well known, but are typically studied in the laboratory setting. In this study, researchers were able to extend these findings by studying the effects of a real-world stressor in a large sample. An important future direction will be to examine why some people are more sensitive than others to stress and to identify coping strategies that help to protect from the effects of stress.

The researchers surveyed more than 1500 Americans between April and June 2020. To conduct the study, participants were asked to rate their level of worry about the COVID-19 pandemic before completing a set of psychological tests measuring basic cognitive ability and risk assessment. For example, participants completed an information processing test in which they were asked to match pairs of digits and symbols according to a fixed rule. For the assessment of risk attitudes, participants were asked to make a series of hypothetical economic choices between certain options and risky options. These data were then compared to results from the same tests given before the start of the pandemic.

According to the investigators, those who experienced a greater amount of stress from the pandemic had reduced information processing speed, decreased information retention, and a heightened sensitivity to the odds given when taking risks. The pandemic group performed more poorly overall on the simple cognitive tasks compared to the pre-pandemic group. Further, participants in the last wave of data collection demonstrated slower processing speed, lower ability to keep goals in mind, and higher risk sensitivity than those in the first wave.

The study results also suggest that pandemic worry could be an effective predictor of a participant's tendency to distort described levels of risk, underweighting likely probabilities and overweighting unlikely probabilities. Researchers say this demonstrates that worries relating to COVID-19 have affected decision-making styles, which could potentially influence decisions about getting vaccinated against COVID-19.

Researchers believe the basic cognitive abilities measured by the study are crucial for healthy daily living and decision-making. The impairments associated with worry observed suggest that under periods of high stress, like a global pandemic, our ability to think, plan, and evaluate risks is altered. Understanding these changes are critical as managing stressful situations often relies on these abilities.

To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the COVID-19 Epidemic and its correlation to increased mental illness, alcohol and substance use in youth and adults please visit www.safeglencove.org.