



What is this crown-wearing virus that wants to defeat the world? COVID-19, we little superheroes know how to beat you!

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Summary

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused a pandemic in the first months of 2020. Many governments, programmed a lockdown involving half of the global population. This article is written in simple language, in the first person, aimed at dissemination to all age groups and population. It also clarifies why restrictions (e.g. lockdown) are necessary and how they can influence children's psychological health. COVID-19 is rarely identified in children because they often remain asymptomatic, or with signs similar to these of influenza. Thus, they could spread it involuntarily.

Young people may, moreover, respond more intensely to the restrictions by experimenting with stress-related symptoms and behavioral problems, which is crucial to identify, by sharing any uncomfortable feelings and asking for support when needed. It is recommended to set a health-conscious daily schedule, maintaining good personal hygiene, and regulating our relationship with the media and lifestyle changes to stay physically and mentally healthy.

Key words: children, psychological wellbeing, prevention, lockdown, healthy routines, awareness of the pandemic

We are worried about COVID-19

We are experiencing something very new. We heard about a virus, apparently similar to every other flu viruses but much more contagious, and able to seriously impair our pulmonary capability to breathe.

It is not the first time that a coronavirus spread and threat humans. However, the other viruses were less transmittable and stayed epidemic. This one, called COroNaVirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), was documented for the first time in November-December 2019¹. COVID-19 caused a pandemic, challenging the world as the perfidious *Thanos* in the *Marvel Avengers*' saga. Thus, it is perfectly normal to feel worried about it.

What is going on?

By the end of March 2020 many governments, all around the world, closed schools, shops, restaurants and every other activity, but not hospitals, groceries and essential services, in a lockdown involving almost a third of the global population. This measure had a positive impact on virus-spread in Wuhan, China, the city where it first was recognized, and it had a positive impact in Italy too, one of the first countries adopting them in March. After a short break during summer, the curves of the contagion are rising again. Thus, many countries are adopting some restrictions or total lockdowns. Now, suppose we can



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How to cite this article: Ferraro L, La Cascia C, Sanna M, et al. What is this crown-wearing virus that wants to defeat the world? COVID-19, we little superheroes know how to beat you! *Evidence-based Psychiatric Care* 2020;6:163-166. <https://doi.org/10.36180/2421-4469-2020-28>

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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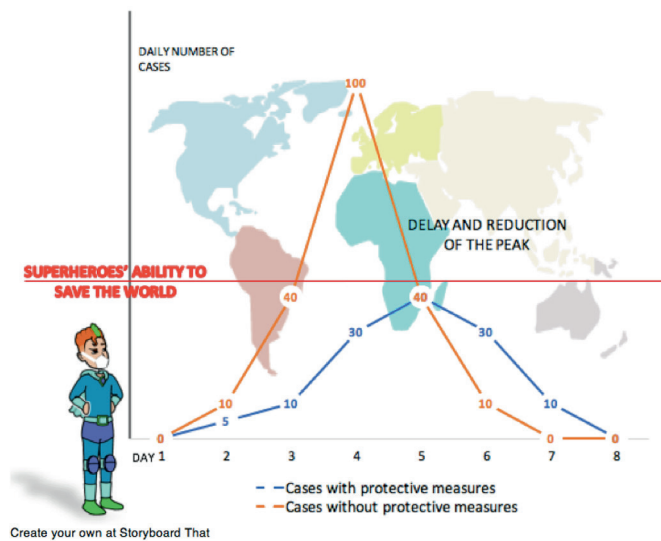


Figure 1.

This figure displays the effect of the protective measures (such as lockdown) in determining the delay and reduction of the peak of new contagions. The X-axis represents the example of progression per day; the Y-axis displays the daily number of cases. The red line “superheroes’ ability to save the world” indicates the health system response.

delay and reduce the peak of the contagion. In this case, we will assure to the healthcare system and its superheroes the time and capability to provide the best answer to this emergency¹ (Fig. 1). Thus, in the period of the first lockdown, we were not allowed to go to school (yeah?), but also to play and go out with friends (sic!), and we were definitively obliged to stay home. A similar situation is very likely to present again in the next days.

What can we do now?

Many people go ahead with their work from home or from offices in protect environments, to guarantee regular social services. Healthcare providers and researchers are the superheroes who are fighting this invisible enemy in person. They tirelessly help sick people and investigate to find a therapy and an effective vaccine. Sometimes, like superheroes, they lose their lives in this battle. Still, as long as an effective cure or a vaccination will not be available, we are their fundamental community helpers.

To do that, we have to follow some simple rules to stay healthy and, very much more challenging, to find the way to stay happy with the new routine we are fitting in.

How the virus manifests itself in children?

Someone could not manifest any symptoms, but no one is immune to COVID-19 yet. People of all ages can be infected, but this virus is rarely identified in children because they remain asymptomatic, or their signs are similar to that of influenza. Symptoms include cough (48.5%),

a sore throat (46.2%), fever (41.5%), abdominal pain and diarrhoea (8.8%), sneezing (7.6%), muscular pain and fatigue (7.6%), sometimes nausea and vomiting (6.4%), and difficulty in breathing (2.3%). Most children also have some laboratory signs of pneumonia, sometimes asymptomatic (65%). Symptoms manifest itself within a range of 2-10 days from the contact.

Only five on one-hundred people infected are children between 0 and 15 years, most of them recover within 1-2 weeks and consequences like severe pneumonia or difficulty in breathing are rare² (Fig. 2).

How can we prevent the infection?

Even if COVID-19 is highly dangerous for the oldest, more than for youngest people, the latter can spread it involuntarily.

The virus spreads through coughs, sneezes, or exhales of people infected. We can get the infection if we inhale those droplets, or touch surfaces where they landed, and then we touch our mouth, nose, or eyes. To avoid the contagion is important to stay at a distance of almost one-two meters (three-six feet) from other people, and remaining at home as much as possible. The “easiest” part for us, as community helpers, is to regulate some automatic gestures like washing our hands for 40 seconds at least, and not touching our mouth, nose, or eyes.

This could also be the opportunity to increase our assertiveness, by encouraging other people to engage in the same habits required both for adults and children.

Could this period affect our psychological well-being?

Staying at home is pleasurable one-two days a week, to take rest. The perspective to be restrained into the house for a long time or indefinitely, by sharing the same environment with other family members is, instead, disorienting or, sometimes, very hard. These times can be tedious, frustrating, conflictive, and parents and other adults who are important for us could manifest new worries and a loss of sense of control. The mind can experiment with stress, sense of isolation, anxiety or low mood if we cannot involve ourselves in outdoor activities and significant relationships. Because we humans are social beings.

Some studies suggest that being out of school, even on regular weekends, produce less physical activity, sleep routine disruption, much longer screen-time, and an altered diet, which can result in weight gain and loss of energy. In interaction with the stress caused by isolation, these lifestyle changes could worsen the effects of this crisis on mental health, in a vicious circle, that determinates other adverse effects.

Young people may respond more intensely, by experimenting stress-related symptoms four times more than people of the same age not restrained at home³. A recent study conducted in China indicates that children and

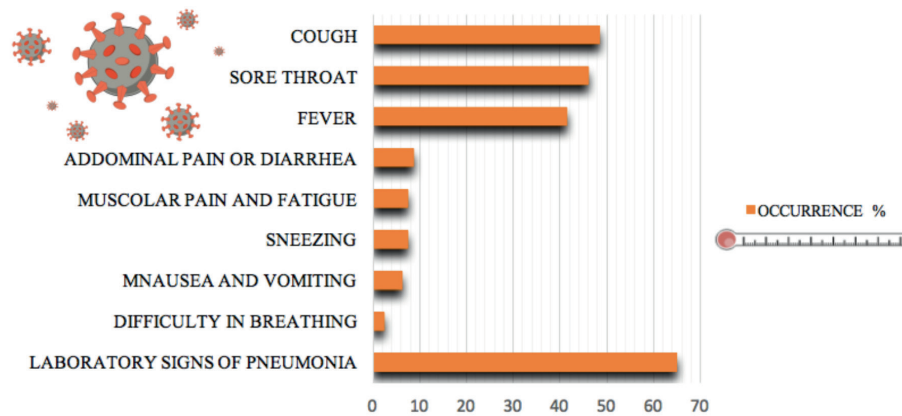


Figure 2.

This bar chart describes the occurrence proportion of signs and symptoms of COVID-19 in children (0-15 years old). Please note that “laboratory signs of pneumonia” do not significantly manifest itself as symptoms.

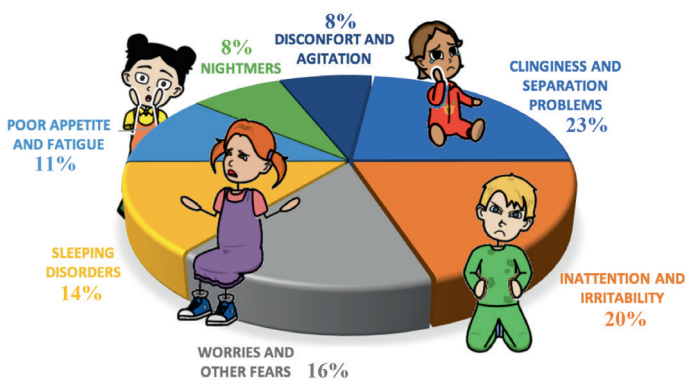


Figure 3.

This pie chart illustrates the occurrence proportion of psychological consequences in children due to the restriction and pandemic effects.

adolescents have been psychologically impacted by COVID-19 lockdown, manifesting behavioral difficulties.

The most reported problems are a high distraction and irritability (20%), agitation and body discomfort (8%), poor sleep and fatigue (14%), sometimes a poor appetite (11%). It is also evident a wide range of fears (16%); for example, nightmares (8%), fear of asking questions about the epidemic or the health of relatives. Depending on the age, children experiment clinginess and fear of separation with their loved ones (23%) (Fig. 3). Adolescents could experiment with uncertainty feelings and a fear of missing-out opportunities or pleasurable activities ⁴.

The hardest part: staying happy with a new routine

Our main work to defeat these psychological and collateral virus' effects is to be stoic, like heroes. We must continuously nurture and defend our warrior soul. We should bear in mind that we are not alone, even if distant.

Several studies suggest social connection and staying in

a good routine as the best way to cope with stress periods, especially if we are constrained at home ³⁻⁵.

It is essential to stay connected with friends, classmates, and family, at least virtually, by video-chats, play-sessions, or video-meetings. We all are experiencing something new and scary and need some comfort and friendship. It is vital to ensure that everyone we love is healthy and does not feel alone.

We should not change our sleeping schedule and try to stick it regularly. Many schools are organizing teaching at a distance, and this is an excellent way to stay connected and do not alter so much our previous routine. Our Monday schedule should be different from a Saturday or Sunday schedule, which merits something special.

Eating well and staying active are also highly recommended not to gain unnecessary weight and to be ready to come back to our habitual lives (and dresses!). We could be tempted to have more snacks or eat unhealthy food, to regulate our negative emotions or boredom feelings. Instead, we can use food to relax in another way, like cooking favourite family plates, or presenting them in the manner of the great chefs! We can use a YouTube at-home workout or follow some shared gym or yoga lessons or dance our favourite song. We can also be reordering our stuff and place (the joy of parents!) to burn calories and stay in a pleasurable environment.

We and the media at the time of COVID-19

The global situation is changing rapidly, and the news is confusing and can generate anxiety. It is essential to stay informed, but it is not good to overwhelm our minds with every kind of communication, coming from the TV or social media. It is better to select only official information and ask our parents or teachers to explain that, when needed, by increasing interpersonal communication.

TV, cellphones, social media, and videogames are our usual way to cover the “meantime”. However, over a certain limit, they become dull and pathologically addictive,

and also able to disrupt our sleep and mood. So, we can try to leave them apart for a while every day and discover something new, like an old board game, or puzzle, or playing an instrument. We can find childhood passions again, like drawing, reading, blocking³⁻⁵.

Dealing with boredom feeling can be frustrating. Nonetheless, boredom is not an enemy, but a formidable supporter of our creativity. We can stay with our thoughts and contemplate them for a while. If we find uncomfortable feelings, we would share them and ask for help and assistance, especially if someone in our family is sick or hospitalized due to the virus.

Yes, we are Superheroes too!

During these difficult times, everyone has to do its best and schools, families, and governments are helping the youngest people, who are the most sacrificed. However, in this challenge, everyone has to do his part as superheroes, to support himself and the community. We love Superheroes because they have strong morale and do the right thing when we would remain stone. They do not break the rules and help everyone, not only their loved ones. As Spiderman instructs: "If you can do good things for other people, you have a moral obligation to do those things. Not a choice - responsibility".

Author contribution

Laura Ferraro conceptualized and wrote the paper; she created figures via StoryboardThat - <https://www.storyboard-that.com/it/comic-maker>. Caterina La Cascia supervised the manuscript with the help of a Young Reviewer. Margherita Sanna contributed to the development of the idea and wrote the glossary. Daniele La Barbera supervised and approved the manuscript.

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