

Covidophobia: From Cytokine Storm to Mass Hysteria, a New Subtype of Hypochondriasis?

Covidofobia: Da Tempestade de Citoquinas à Histeria de Massas: um Novo Subtipo de Hipocondríase?

Keywords: Anxiety; Coronavirus Infections/psychology; COVID-19; Phobic Disorders

Palavras-chave: Ansiedade; COVID-19; Infecções por Coronavírus/psicologia; Perturbações Fóbicas

Dear Editor, we have been reading with great interest the various articles published in your journal regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on healthcare systems.

The pandemic is, indeed, a cause for grave concern, as proper clinical decision-making is challenged by exaggerated information.¹ But if there is an overwhelming amplified immune response to the virus (e.g. cytokine storm), we believe there is also an ongoing excessive reaction from society (e.g. mass hysteria). Some authors already have called it coronaphobia,² but we believe covidophobia would be a more appropriate concept, as it reflects fear of the disease and not fear of the virus itself. Therefore, we would like to propose covidophobia as the latest subtype of hypochondriasis (illness anxiety disorder) under the ever-growing modern phenomenon that is pandemic related cyberchondria (e.g. excessive online information search).³ Unfortunately, only time will tell if psychopharmacological and psychotherapeutic options used in the treatment of classic hypochondriasis will have some impact on these new syndromes.

Looking at the cytokine storm and mass hysteria analo-

gy further in depth, it is noteworthy to find that error and misinformation act in a similarly vicarious way as T-helper type 1 hyper response, with high levels of interleukin 1 Beta (IL-1 β) and interferon gamma (IFN- γ), among others.⁴ In both cases, more information and in-depth research is necessary, since the intricate complexity is multifaceted and past experience may help, but not necessarily explain, the current situation.⁵

Using the Internet, misleading information propagates fast with an exaggerated reaction by its specific receptors: humans who may not necessarily be able to critically appraise scientific information. Since we do not know if the cytokine storm is accidental, or an intended viral strategy, we also do not know if viral misinformation is a result of deliberated hidden agendas or Dunning-Kruger phenomenon (illusory superiority as a form of cognitive bias).⁶ Other authors have already expressed this kind of concern, in particular what they called human bias.⁷ The Internet is populated with individuals, some quite well organized in groups, whose lack of trust in governments, pharmaceutical companies and mainstream media can be quite devoid of critical thinking. We then have a hyper stimulated society, much like a cytokine storm that overwhelms COVID-19 patients.

Individually, surviving the infection will leave some patients with lung fibrosis. Collectively, the scars that COVID-19 will leave in society will take its toll, as other pandemics did in the past, increasing fear, inequalities, privacy violations, lack of empathy, and ideological extremism – a glimpse of a fascinating, yet perniciously dystopian future.

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Recebido: 11 de junho de 2020 - Aceite: 26 de outubro de 2020 | Copyright © Ordem dos Médicos 2020

<https://doi.org/10.20344/amp.14322>

