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POST-COVID-19 ONLINE LEARNING AND THE RISE IN STUDENT MENTAL & NEUROLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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Annotation: Post-COVID-19 online learning has led to a significant rise in mental and neurological health problems among students. The abrupt shift from in-person education to remote learning during the pandemic caused a range of psychological issues, including increased stress, anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairments. Extended screen time, lack of social interaction, disruptions in routines, and environmental stressors contributed to heightened mental health challenges. Vulnerable groups, such as students with neurodevelopmental disorders, were disproportionately affected. The long-term consequences of these issues may impact students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and neurological development, necessitating a holistic approach to student mental health in the post-pandemic era.

Key Words:post-covid-19, online learning, student mental health, neurological problems, screen time fatigue, depression, anxiety, stress, social isolation, learning disabilities, neurodevelopmental disorders, cognitive impairment, virtual fatigue, mental health support, education systems.

Аннотация:Онлайн-обучение после пандемии COVID-19 привело к значительному увеличению числа проблем с психическим и неврологическим здоровьем среди студентов. Резкий переход от очного обучения к дистанционному во время пандемии вызвал ряд психологических проблем, включая повышенный стресс, тревогу, депрессию и когнитивные нарушения. Длительное время перед экраном, отсутствие социального взаимодействия, нарушения распорядка дня и стрессовые факторы окружающей среды способствовали обострению проблем с психическим здоровьем. Уязвимые группы, такие как учащиеся с нарушениями нервно-психического развития, пострадали непропорционально сильнее. Долгосрочные последствия этих проблем могут повлиять на успеваемость учащихся, эмоциональное благополучие и неврологическое развитие, что потребует целостного подхода к психическому здоровью учащихся в постпандемическую эпоху.

Ключевые слова:пост-covid-19, онлайн-обучение, психическое здоровье учащихся, неврологические проблемы, усталость от экранного времени, депрессия, тревога, стресс, социальная изоляция, неспособность к обучению, нарушения нервно-психического развития, когнитивные нарушения, виртуальная усталость, поддержка психического здоровья, системы образования.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a dramatic shift in how education was delivered worldwide. Schools and universities quickly transitioned to online learning, a change that had significant, sometimes unforeseen, impacts on students' mental and neurological health. While remote learning helped ensure education continuity during lockdowns, it also created new challenges that continue to affect students today.

Key Factors in the Rise of Mental and Neurological Issues:

1. **Increased Screen Time and Digital Fatigue**: With the shift to online learning, students were required to spend extended hours in front of screens. Prolonged screen time has been linked to various mental and physical health issues, such as eye strain, headaches, and sleep disturbances, due to blue light exposure and disrupted circadian rhythms. Additionally, "Zoom fatigue," a term that gained prominence during the pandemic, refers to the exhaustion associated with constant virtual interactions and the cognitive load of non-verbal communication cues being harder to interpret online.
2. **Social Isolation and Lack of Peer Interaction**: One of the most significant challenges of online learning was the loss of face-to-face social interactions that typically occur in physical classrooms. Many students, especially those in high school and college, experienced loneliness and isolation. Social connections play a critical role in emotional well-being, and the absence of in-person interaction led to feelings of disconnection, anxiety, and depression. For students already at risk for mental health issues, the shift to online learning exacerbated pre-existing conditions.
3. **Increased Stress and Anxiety**: The pandemic itself caused widespread anxiety, with uncertainty about health, safety, and the future creating a heightened sense of stress. Many students also struggled with the new demands of online learning, such as navigating unfamiliar technology, self-discipline to stay on task, and balancing academic pressures without the immediate support of teachers and peers. The lack of structure and accountability in remote learning environments often led to procrastination, poor time management, and an increased sense of overwhelm.
4. **Family and Environmental Stressors**: For many students, the transition to online learning occurred within the context of home environments that were not conducive to learning. Financial difficulties, overcrowded living conditions, and the presence of caregiving responsibilities added layers of stress. Students who had to share space with family members or care for younger siblings often faced distractions that made it difficult to focus on their studies. Furthermore, many students lacked access to the necessary technology and reliable internet connections for effective learning, exacerbating feelings of frustration and helplessness.
5. **Disruption of Routines and Lack of Physical Activity**: Routines, including regular school schedules, extracurricular activities, and physical exercise, are important for students' mental health. The closure of gyms, sports, and other physical outlets during lockdowns disrupted students' coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety. Physical inactivity has been shown to contribute to mental health decline, and without the usual opportunities for movement and social interaction, many students experienced worsening mental and neurological issues.
6. **Academic Pressure and Uncertainty About the Future**: The uncertainty surrounding assessments during the pandemic, with many schools canceling exams or shifting to remote assessments, contributed to anxiety about academic performance. Students who struggled with the transition to online learning felt anxious about falling behind in their coursework, while others faced uncertainty about their post-pandemic academic or career paths. For some, this led to feelings of inadequacy and heightened stress levels.
7. **Impact on Neurodevelopmental and Learning Disabilities**: Students with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and learning disabilities, were disproportionately affected by the shift to online learning. Remote education often lacked the individualized support and accommodations that students with these conditions typically receive in person. The absence of hands-on learning experiences and the challenges of managing online platforms led to difficulties with focus, organization, and processing information. For these students, the transition was often especially difficult, potentially exacerbating existing symptoms or creating new challenges in mental and neurological health.

Mental Health Consequences:

1. **Depression**: Depression rates have risen significantly among students since the onset of the pandemic. Social isolation, academic pressures, and the loss of routine contributed to a sense of

hopelessness and lack of motivation in many students. The lack of social support from peers and teachers led to increased feelings of loneliness.

2. **Anxiety Disorders**: Anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and social anxiety, were exacerbated by the pandemic. The uncertainty surrounding school closures, health concerns, and changes in how students engaged with their education caused an uptick in anxiety symptoms. For many students, the increased pressure to adapt to remote learning led to chronic worry and physical symptoms of anxiety.

3. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**: For some students, the pandemic represented a traumatic event, particularly for those who lost family members or were directly impacted by COVID-19. The isolation, loss of routine, and constant fear of health risks led to post-traumatic stress reactions for some students, with symptoms including flashbacks, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness.

4. **Sleep Disorders**: The disruption of daily schedules, increased screen time, and lack of physical activity led to widespread sleep disturbances among students. Lack of proper sleep can exacerbate mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, and can impair cognitive function, making it harder for students to focus and perform academically.

Neurological Health Impacts:

The mental and emotional toll of the pandemic also had neurological consequences, as prolonged stress can affect brain function. Research indicates that chronic stress can impair areas of the brain involved in learning, memory, and emotional regulation, potentially leading to difficulties in cognition and mood regulation.

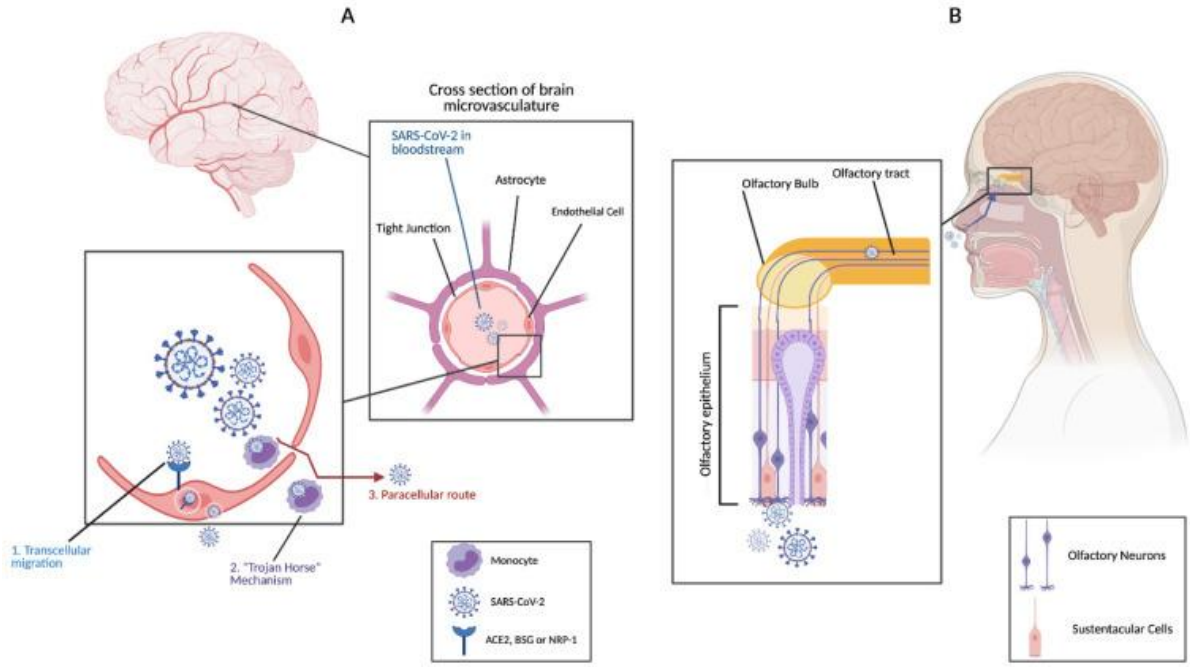
Some neurological symptoms observed in students include:

- **Cognitive Impairment**: Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, and trouble with problem-solving are common cognitive symptoms associated with stress and anxiety.
- **Memory Issues**: Chronic stress can affect the hippocampus, the area of the brain associated with memory formation, leading to issues with recall and retention of information.
- **Motor Function**: For some students, increased stress levels have been linked to motor function problems, such as hand tremors or poor coordination.

Long-Term Implications:

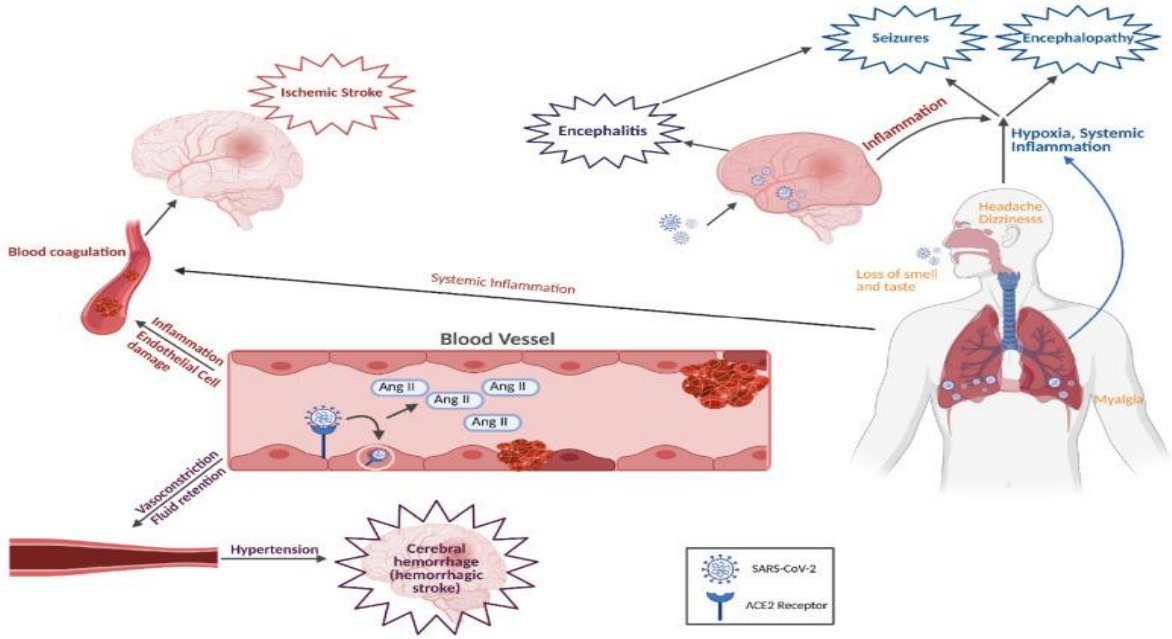
As students continue to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, the long-term effects on mental and neurological health remain a concern. Addressing these challenges will require continued attention to mental health support, the restoration of in-person learning, and the integration of social-emotional learning into educational curricula. Mental health services must be expanded to address the increased demand for psychological support, and schools must adopt policies that prioritize student well-being alongside academic performance.

Mechanisms of SARS-CoV-2 Invasion of the CNS



Mechanisms of SARS-CoV-2 invasion of the CNS. (A) Hematogenous route: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) invasion of CNS from the bloodstream is mediated by three mechanisms; 1. Transcellular migration which involves binding of the virus to its receptors; ACE2, basigin (BSG), or neuropilin-1 (NRP-1), on brain microvasculature endothelial cells then crossing endothelial cells via transcytosis, 2. Infecting immune cells which then carry the virus across the blood–brain barrier (BBB) endothelial cells into the CNS (Trojan Horse mechanism), and 3. Paracellular route by disrupting endothelial cells' tight junctions. (B) SARS-CoV-2 infects olfactory epithelium and reaches the CNS via the olfactory neurons. This figure was created with BioRender.com.

Neurological Disorders and Their Management in COVID-19 Patients



Mechanisms of COVID-19 neurological complications. Lung infection by SARS-CoV-2 results in severe inflammation, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), and hypoxia. This leads to hypoxia- and inflammation-induced encephalopathy and seizures. Brain damage due to viral replication may lead to

encephalitis. Severe systemic inflammation could result in hypercoagulability which may eventually lead to stroke. Nonspecific symptoms due to nervous system affections include headache, dizziness, loss of taste and smell, and myalgia. Usage of ACE2 receptor; by SARS-CoV-2, to infect target cells, including endothelial cells, would deplete the receptor resulting in the accumulation of angiotensin II (AngII). High levels of AngII promote vasoconstriction, fluid retention, inflammation, and blood coagulation, which could result in ischemic or hemorrhagic stroke. This figure was created with BioRender.com.

Conclusion:

While online learning provided a necessary solution during the pandemic, it also highlighted the fragility of students' mental and neurological health. The long-term effects of increased screen time, isolation, stress, and disrupted routines will likely be felt for years to come. Moving forward, education systems must recognize the importance of mental health, adapt learning environments to support students' psychological and neurological well-being, and ensure that all students have access to the resources and support they need to thrive in both academic and personal dimensions.

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