



## The Mental Health Context of Vietnamese People during the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 Pandemic

Tran Le Thanh<sup>1</sup>, Nguyen Thi Mai Lan<sup>2\*</sup>, Vu Dung<sup>2</sup>, Vu Thu Trang<sup>3</sup> and Lieu Cao Xuan<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>People's Security Academy, Ministry of Public Security of Viet Nam, Hanoi, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Psychology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam

<sup>3</sup>Hanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam

<sup>4</sup>National Academy of Education Management, Hanoi, Vietnam

\*Corresponding e-mail: [mailanvientamlyhoc@gmail.com](mailto:mailanvientamlyhoc@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*This article presents the mental health context of Vietnamese people during the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease in 2019) pandemic. The data was collected nationwide (63 provinces and cities) by questionnaires, with a total of 3664 people participating. Prolonged pandemics caused people to experience a series of intertwined thoughts and feelings, such as anxiety, stress, loss of control, and even causing trauma or other mental disorders. In a stalemate, in-person or online support from counselors, and clinicians were the people's most effective solution. However, for various reasons, this support has not brought the expected radical. The findings described the lack of human resources to support mental health, as well as the limited capacity of current personnel unable to secure this job in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, Expert support, Mental health, Vietnam

### INTRODUCTION

The Delta variant has caused outbreaks with infection rates many times higher than previous variants, potentially increasing the severity of patients and the risk of death. The Delta (COVID-19 variant) variant appeared to upset the fight against the campaign of many countries, including Vietnam [1]. In addition, the emergence of a new variant called Omicron (COVID-19 variant) is currently prevailing in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City while the Delta strain is still in circulation [2]. Therefore, the impact of the Delta variant is still considered the main issue that needs to be addressed. In the 4<sup>th</sup> outbreak (from April 27, 2021, to the end of February 2022), Vietnam recorded many infections of 3,436,124 cases, of which 2,436,134 patients were declared cured. In the face of that urgent situation, the progress of vaccination is constantly accelerating in hopes of preventing new strains of the disease soon. As of mid-February 2022, Vietnam has vaccinated more than 186,5 million doses of vaccines, of which more than 32 million are administered [3].

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, each citizen will experience many different anxieties, such as worries about their health, finances, and relatives. Not only in children but also in adults, there will also be a lot of negative and positive emotions when learning about COVID-19, as well as when participating in vaccination [4]. According to Ciotti, et al., COVID-19 changes social life [5]. The isolation at home and social distancing are not allowed to communicate with many people around, making people uncomfortable, and frustrated because they are not relieved. This stress and melancholy are exacerbated when people know they will be vaccinated but do not know when. This is the cause of increased anxiety and depression. WHO warns that stress during the COVID-19 outbreak may increase the risk of depression at any age [6]. The COVID-19 pandemic is a new, pervasive mass trauma that can impact the mental health of adults, children, and vulnerable groups both now and in the future. This trauma is highly likely to exacerbate existing mental health problems and contribute to new stress-related diseases [7].

Currently, much research has mentioned forecasting orientations and recommendations to establish mental health strategies with affected groups in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, people’s feelings toward getting the COVID-19 vaccine are intertwined with negative and positive emotional sequences. Understanding the changes, as well as predicting the psychological change in this context will help people raise awareness, be able to reassure themselves and improve their health, and support a reasonable and effective spirit [8]. By compiling research documents on trauma and other mental health problems that Vietnamese people can encounter in the context of the pandemic continues and after the epidemic is controlled, thereby conducting forecasts on people’s mental health problems according to the course of the pandemic [9].

Understanding COVID-19 as well as how to take care of mental health in this context is urgent, from which, this study was conducted to describe the current mental health context of Vietnamese people during the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 outbreak.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study uses questionnaire investigation as the main method to shed light on the psychological progress of the Vietnamese people during the 4<sup>th</sup> pandemic. The data was collected by selecting random samples nationwide (63 provinces/cities) from June 2021 to September 2021, with a total of 3664 people participating in the survey (Table 1 and Table 2). The questionnaire contains the following main contents:

**Part 1**

Implementation guide and personal information.

**Part 2**

The system of questions to understand the psychological progress of the Vietnamese people in the 4<sup>th</sup> pandemic. The structure of the questionnaire consists of 10 items. In particular, item 1-3 review feeling and thoughts about COVID-19; item 4-5 is People’s behavior when facing COVID-19-related stressors; Item 6-7 is the use of professional support; Item 8-10 is an assessment of mental health during the pandemic period. People were asked to choose an answer that most accurately reflected on them from 5 answer options. The answers to questions and how people handle situations are evaluated on 5 levels and encrypted by SPSS for windows 20.0 software as follows: From level 1 to 1.80: Very low; From 1.81 to 2.61: Low; From 2.62 to 3.42: Average; From 3.43 to 4.23: High; From 4.24 to 5.00: Very high.

**Table 1 Description of participants by gender**

Gender	Male	Female	Total
N	644	3020	3664
%	17.6	82.4	100.0

**Table 2 Description of participants by age**

Age	<18	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66-75	>75	Total
N	13	1515	868	855	370	37	6	0	3664
%	0.35	41.35	23.69	23.34	10.10	1.01	0.16	0	100.0

SPSS software version of Windows 20.0 is used to analyze data from the questionnaire. Inferred statistical calculations are used: Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), Ranking (R), and percentage (%).

**An Overview of Mental Health Studies during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Research by Chakraborty and Chatterjee shows that, in India, where the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is terrible, the health and wellness system is overwhelmed. The increased infections have caused constant anxiety and stress for people in general as well as doctors and nurses [10]. An overview of Xiong, et al. on the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in many countries shows that the proportion of the population with psychological symptoms is relatively high although varies from country to country. These include anxiety (6.33% to 50.9%), depression (from 14.6% to 48.3%), emotional disorders (from 7% to 53.8%), suffering (from 34.43% to

38%), and stress (from 8.1% to 81.9%). Prati and Mancini present meta-analysis data from about 2,000 studies that showed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic that mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, stress, memory impairment, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and many other complex neurological damages persisted later [11]. A New Zealand study by Gasteiger, et al. on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic found that people in the country had high levels of anxiety and depression during the first 10 weeks of the outbreak. The results were that young people under the age of 30 had a higher risk of developing COVID-19-related mental health disorders [12]. A recent study by Panchal, et al. in the US found that approximately two-fifths of people over the age of 18 experienced insomnia (36%), skipping meals (32%), substance use (12%), and suicidal thoughts (26%), and chronic diseases exacerbated. Mental health is also related to the state of income and employment during the pandemic [13].

Overall, there has been quite a lot of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health since the outbreak. Studies conducted in many different fields and diverse subjects, however, it can be seen that stress factors are the main cause of affecting people's mental health.

In Vietnam, research by Giang Thien Vu, et al. showed that the emergence of vaccines as a spiritual resource helps people ensure their health, and ability to cope with the pandemic. However, the process of recognizing information about the first vaccine source imported to Vietnam until the completion of two injections is a complex psychological change from stress, anxiety intertwined with joy, and nervousness [8]. Research by Nguyen Thi Minh Hong, et al. analyzed possible traumas in Vietnamese adults, children, and disadvantaged groups, thereby proposing a COVID-19 mental health care strategy tailored to the context. This research confirms that the index of happiness or mental health is no longer a matter of only concern and mention, but must take practical actions, especially the program of mental health care [9]. Research by Bui Thi Thanh Van, et al. showed that the proportion of health workers participating in COVID-19 prevention in some hospitals participating in the research exhibited symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression of 19.5%, 8%, and 5.7%, respectively [14]. Research by Nguyen Hoang Thuy Linh, et al. shows that 12.7% of students show signs of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is an association between mental health and factors such as curriculum, financial security status, anxiety about the future, chronic disease, current health complaints, the importance of searching for information on the Internet, and satisfaction with the quality of information about the epidemic ( $p < 0.05$ ) [15]. The study by Van Nguyen found that job losses are the cause of psychological stress and that frequent travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic also hurt the mental health of workers in the tourism industry. Interviewees used a variety of methods to reduce the stress on their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic [16].

From the above studies, the current limitation of mental health research in Vietnam is the lack of nationwide descriptive studies to clarify the mental health context of Vietnamese people during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in-depth studies on how to effectively support people.

## RESULTS

### Vietnamese People's Feelings and Thoughts on COVID-19

From Table 3, the overall mean of feelings and thoughts of Vietnamese people reached 2.029, corresponding to low levels. This result reflects the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a great impact on people's mental health. According to the Ministry of Health, the situation of the pandemic is increasingly tense, with the number of deaths continuously increasing across the country. Therefore, the pressure on the front-line forces is immense. Before that news, people also carried the mentality of bewilderment, anxiously waiting for the day to receive the notification of the vaccination.

An in-depth analysis of each item ranked first is 'I am stressed about the pandemic' with  $M=2.285$ , corresponding to the low level. This finding suggests that people face constant stress in their lives, especially with the increasingly complex changes of the pandemic.

Ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> is 'I feel like I am still in control of everything during the pandemic' with  $M=2.205$ , corresponding to the low level. This proves that people's lives during the pandemic period always have challenges that they need to face.

Ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> is 'I am worried when things related to the pandemic are out of my control' with  $M=2.117$ , corresponding to the low level. This result reflects that in addition to worrying about the pandemic situation, people are also worried about other issues related to and affected by COVID-19 such as job loss, family relationships, parenting, economy, etc.

The 4<sup>th</sup> place is ‘I feel bad things related to the pandemic can happen at any time’ with M=2.063, corresponding to the low. The same ranking is ‘I feel the difficulty increasing during the pandemic and I cannot get over it. The above results reflect that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused anxiety for people.

In the 5<sup>th</sup>, ‘I feel optimistic because things are going well during the pandemic’ with M=2.049-low level. This result demonstrates that, even though there are still beautiful things going on in the pandemic situation, they are still unable to maintain optimism when surrounded by the effects of COVID-19.

The item ‘I am confident that I can handle the problems related to the pandemic’ ranked in 6<sup>th</sup> place with M=2.047, corresponding to a low level. This is a sign that people are embarrassed about solving the problems that revolve around themselves.

The 7<sup>th</sup> item ‘I can control my mental health even if I am infected’ with M=2.026, corresponds to the low level. When encountering problems such as COVID-19, it is not easy to take consistent actions with thoughts that help overcome real mental health disorders.

The next item ‘I find it hard to control the important things because of the pandemic’ ranked 8<sup>th</sup> with M=1.930, corresponding to the low level. The final ranking ‘I feel like I cannot control the risk of infection’ ranked 9<sup>th</sup>, M=1.751, corresponding to very low levels, specifically 46.56% choose as often and 16.81% choose never. From the results of these two items, we can see that even if the COVID-19 pandemic ends, the negative mental effects that the pandemic leaves behind will still affect many people more or less.

**Table 3 Feelings and thoughts about COVID-19; (1=never, 2=hardly ever, 3=often, 4=sometimes, 5=usually)**

Feelings and thoughts about COVID-19	Level										M	SD	R
	1		2		3		4		5				
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
I feel bad things related to the pandemic can happen at any time	412	11.24	295	8.05	1904	51.97	758	20.69	295	8.05	2.063	1.0274	4
I find it hard to control the important things because of the pandemic	436	11.90	513	14.00	1783	48.66	736	20.09	196	5.35	1.930	1.0130	8
I am stressed about the pandemic	244	6.66	323	8.82	1676	45.74	985	26.88	436	11.90	2.285	1.0090	1
I am confident that I can handle the problems related to the pandemic	368	10.04	622	16.98	1522	41.54	774	21.12	378	10.32	2.047	1.0925	6
I feel optimistic because things are going well during the pandemic	443	12.09	578	15.78	1446	39.47	750	20.47	447	12.20	2.049	1.1541	5
I feel like I cannot control the risk of infection	616	16.81	600	16.38	1706	46.56	564	15.39	178	4.86	1.751	1.0596	9
I can control my mental health even if I am infected	408	11.14	584	15.94	1558	42.52	733	20.01	381	10.40	2.026	1.1047	7
I feel like I am still in control of everything during the pandemic	277	7.56	400	10.92	1674	45.69	920	25.11	393	10.73	2.205	1.0246	2
I am worried when things related to the pandemic are out of my control	357	9.74	448	12.23	1661	45.33	806	22.00	392	10.70	2.117	1.0708	3
I feel the difficulty increasing during the pandemic and I cannot get over it	547	14.93	646	17.63	1647	44.95	580	15.83	244	6.66	2.063	1.0793	4
M=2.029													

**People’s Behaviour when Facing COVID-19-Related Stressors**

From the results of Table 4, the mean of people’s behavior when facing COVID-19-related stressors reached 1.507, corresponding to very low levels, including in the mean of each content. This is the inability of the people to face practical shortages (food, finance, medicine, etc.) [17,18].

The first item of ‘Complaint, get angry’ with M=1.743, with 24% choosing no and 9% choosing yes. The second item of ‘Avoid (pretend not to know/don’t tell anyone your mood/avoid talking about your mood...)’ with M=1.730, 24%

choose no and 9% choose yes. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> item ‘Seek professional support (psychologists, social workers, doctors, etc.)’ with M=1.610, there are 20% choose no and 13% choose yes. The way ‘Pray for miracles from the spiritual world’ ranked 4<sup>th</sup> with M=1.523, there are 17% choose no and 16% choose yes. Next is the way to ‘Seek support from family, friends, relatives with M=1.266, with 25% choosing yes and 9% choosing no. Finally, there is the way to ‘Accept the truth, and slowly calm down’ with M=1.170, with 28% choosing, yes and 6% choosing no.

**Table 4 People’s behavior when facing COVID-19-related stressors**

Behavior	Yes		No		M	SD	R
	N	%	N	%			
Accept the truth, and slowly calm down	3041	28	623	6	1.170	0.3757	6
Seek support from family, friends, relatives	2691	25	973	9	1.266	0.4417	5
Pray for miracles from the spirituality	1747	16	1917	17	1.523	0.4995	4
Seek professional support (psychologists, social workers, doctors, clinicians)	1428	13	2236	20	1.610	0.4878	3
Avoid (pretend not to know/do not tell anyone about your mood)	991	9	2673	24	1.730	0.4443	2
Complain, get angry	943	9	2721	24	1.743	0.4372	1
M=1.507							

**Use of Professional Support**

From the results of Table 5, the overall mean is 1.738; the general and the whole tablet of specific forms are corresponding to very low levels. The first rank is ‘In-site support at home’ with M=1.856; the second rank is ‘Telephone consultations’ with M=1.812; next is ‘Online support from experts’ with M=1.801; and finally, ‘Read the guide publications from government’ with M=1.484.

**Table 5 Use of professional support**

Form of support	M	SD	R
Telephone consultations	1.812	0.3904	2
Online support from experts	1.801	0.3993	3
In-site support at home	1.856	0.3507	1
Read the guide publications from the government	1.484	0.4998	4
M=1.738			

**DISCUSSION**

From the results, the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has caused great mental effects on the Vietnamese people. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic causes many people to fall into a state of stress, and severe, prolonged psychological trauma, which can lead to many mental disorders. In Vietnam, COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health problems, causing cases of depression to increase. From surveying the mental health context of Vietnamese people during the 4<sup>th</sup> pandemic, we discuss the following issues:

In the face of the emergence and destruction of the pandemic are changed in daily living habits in the context of socio-economic impact. People always feel anxious and these worries repeat every day with different problems in life without being able to stop thinking about them for fear of being insurmountable. Accompanying worry is a feeling of insecurity, anxiety, or a feeling of standing on the edge of not knowing what the future of yourself and those around you will be when things are related to a pandemic that is beyond our control. Because of facing so many changes and difficulties in the present, many people become less interested or not interested in studying, work, and hobbies,

especially in case of infection. Before the period of isolation and prolonged pandemics, not knowing when it would end led people to feel depressed, even desperate in life. The above can increase the risk of mental health disorders, the pressures (online working, online learning, etc.) along with negative information about the pandemic that makes many people stressed or anxiety disorders.

People's lives are bound compared to the past such as the regulation of wearing masks, limiting yourself to the road, not gathering large numbers of people, and not having close contact with others, especially during the time of social distancing. Home isolation, lack of food, medicine, parenting, family relationships, job loss, economy, and waiting for vaccination makes many people uncomfortable, prolonged stress leads to depression and mental disorders. These things, leading to the helplessness of the people is increasingly evident in the behavior when facing problems that cannot be solved by themselves. The most common way is supposed to be to complain about things or get angry with people around you. When frequent complaining or anger still does not solve the problem, many people start to use avoidance of reality, by pretending they know nothing, telling no one, and avoiding letting people talk about their moods. When unable to address current concerns on their own, many people begin to seek support, for them, this is considered a highly feasible solution. Others look to the way of praying for a miracle, this is reflected in the people who have faith in religion, and believe in the blessing of ancestors or gods. Besides, the support from family and friends is evaluated poorly than other solutions. Perhaps, in the current general situation, everyone is struggling to solve their worries, so it is sometimes less feasible to seek help from them. Finally, when encountering things that cannot be changed (death, jobless, bankruptcy), they must choose to accept the truth so that they can get used to it and calm down.

From the inability to solve the problems encountered, the use of professional support forms is considered effective. In-site support at home is the most chosen solution, at the height of the pandemic, this form is used mainly by the doctor/health workers visiting at home for some cases of serious illness/isolation area. To provide maximum support, multiple emergency phone numbers, volunteer groups, or community projects begin to operate in the form of situational counseling, medical advice, or counseling over the phone. This is considered the most feasible form in the time of the pandemic, limiting contact, and limiting the road. In addition, many seminars with experts are also organized to provide knowledge and answer questions the people. This form has received the support and participation of many reputable and experienced professionals. The last form of support is to read the instructional publications from the government. In this form, there is little choice and appreciation from the people for many reasons. The content conveyed is not specific, confusing, and not widely available to each citizen. This took time to read and understand. However, although people have prioritized seeking solutions from experts when facing big problems, in fact, they still show helplessness. This context makes us wonder if the current health and mental health care in Vietnam can support the people during the pandemic, or have reached the minimum quality of human resources and implementation process?

### CONCLUSION

The mental health context of Vietnamese people during the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 pandemic is extremely complicated by its enormous impact on life. The pandemic spread across the country, both causing loss of life and seriously affecting mental health. Mental health care, especially when living with the pandemic, is essential along with efforts to treat and cure patients, reducing the number of deaths from COVID-19. The prolonged pandemic causes many people to fall into a state of anxiety, stress, and prolonged psychological trauma. When people show signs of mental health disorders, they begin to seek psychological support from experts. The relevant units/organizations, along with professional contributions, have taken various measures to support people to solve difficult problems during the pandemic. However, these measures have not been as effective as expected, because many people still feel helpless and stuck in their problems.

Minimizing the dangerous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health is an urgent and priority task to stabilize public health, contributing to reversing the pandemic. Therefore, promoting a long-term, effective, and quality mental care strategy for people in the context of the pandemic is an urgent need to both support the front line and the people to overcome the stress, anxiety, and trauma that are encountered.

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## DECLARATIONS

### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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