

‘Diagnostic conundrum’: COVID-19 pandemic has given us a lot of clinically depressed people

As a rough average, during pre-pandemic life, [5 to 7 percent](#) of people met the criteria for a diagnosis of depression. Now, depending how you define the condition, orders of magnitude more people do. Robert Klitzman, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, extrapolates from a recent [Lancet](#) study in China to estimate that about 50 percent of the U.S. population is experiencing depressive symptoms. “We are witnessing the mental-health implications of massive disease and death,” he says.

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Feelings of numbness, powerlessness, and hopelessness are now so common as to verge on being considered normal. But what we are seeing is far less likely an actual increase in a disease of the brain than a series of circumstances that is drawing out a similar neurochemical mix. This poses a diagnostic conundrum. Millions of people exhibiting signs of depression now have to discern ennui from temporary grieving from a medical condition.

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Clearly articulating the meaning of medical depression is an existential challenge for the mental-health profession, and for a country that does not ensure its people health care. If we fail, the second wave of death from this pandemic will not be directly caused by the virus. It will take the people who suffered mentally from its reverberations.

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