

Society's responses to the pandemic may have triggered one benefit: Reduced competition for sleep

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Society has gone through a lot of changes over the last two years. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) began in the early months of 2020. In an attempt to slow the spread of the virus, lockdowns, stay-at-home mandates, shifts to remote work/school, and other social distancing strategies forced people to remain at home. It wasn't long before school cafeterias and watercooler chats were replaced with snacks on the couch and Zoom meetings. It was unknown how the sudden withdrawal from society, radical shift in day-to-day routines, and looming threat of deadly disease would affect people's well-being. Researchers anticipated that these disruptions would wreak havoc on sleep and mental health. They leapt into action to find out.

Some of the data collected were as expected, but some were not.

As expected, people showed mental health distress in the beginning of COVID-19. Researchers sent out a survey during the first months of COVID-19. Survey results showed:

- 25.6% of respondents met clinical criteria for **anxiety**
- 23.1% of respondents met clinical criteria for **depression**
- 36.7% of respondents reported **insomnia symptoms**
- 17.4% of respondents met clinical criteria for **insomnia disorder**

The following characteristics were associated with increased risk of developing mental health and sleep problems during the early stages of COVID-19:

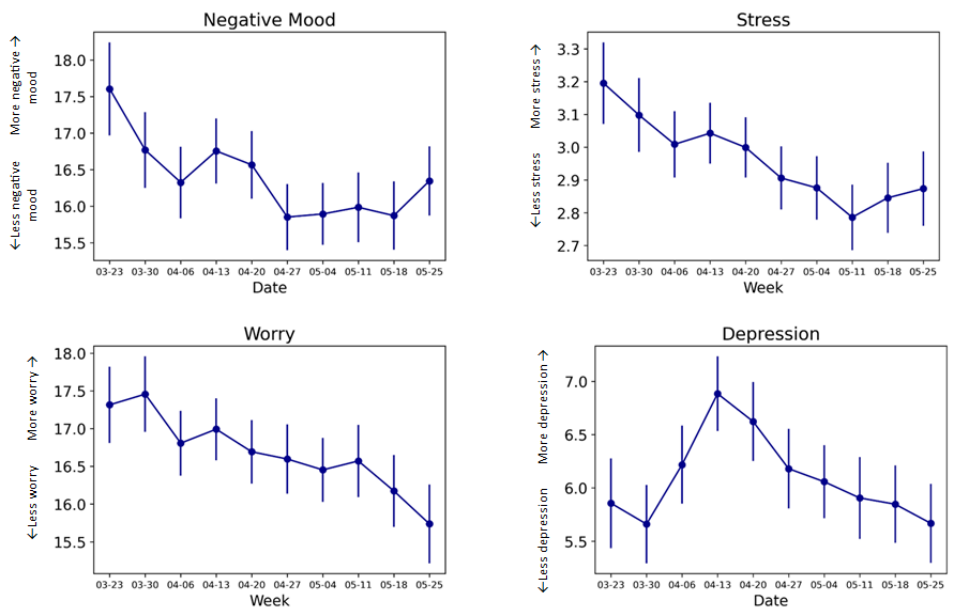
- Healthcare and other essential workers
- Patients with pre-existing psychiatric disorders
- Female gender
- Younger adults (despite increased severity of COVID-19 in older adults)
- People who lived alone



- People who lived with more than 5 people in the same household
- People who were in confinement for 4-5 weeks
- People who had increased financial burden due to COVID-19
- People who were infected with COVID-19
- People who had a relative(s) affected by COVID-19

Unexpectedly, researchers discovered that most people adjusted surprisingly quickly to this new way of life. In the United States, the first wave of stay-at-home orders were initiated on March 21, 2020. **In the first 10 weeks of the stay-at-home order, people's negative mood, stress, and worry improved.** At first, people reported feeling more depressed. In the following weeks, however, depression also rapidly improved (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1



These findings suggest that there may have been an initial spike in mental health distress (some of which may have preceded the initiation of stay-at-home orders), but these stresses decreased after just a few weeks. How were people able to cope under these undeniably stressful times? One reason may be less competition for sleep!

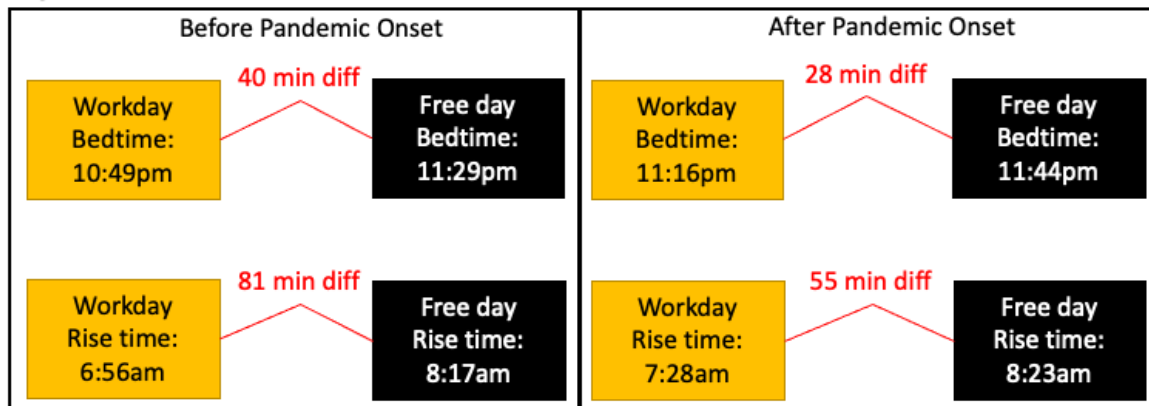
Overall, researchers agree that sleep improved during COVID-19!

1. **People slept more**
 - On average, people got more sleep during COVID-19 than they did before pandemic life (5 to 20 minutes more each night).
2. **Bedtimes and waketimes became more consistent (Figure 2)**



- Before COVID-19, people tended to go sleep and wake up later on the weekend than during the workweek. On average, people went to sleep 40 minutes later and woke up almost an hour and a half later on the weekend.
- During COVID-19, people tended to go to sleep and wake up later in general (on the weekend and during the workweek). However, they kept more similar bedtimes and waketimes between the weekend and workweek. On average, people went to sleep 30 minutes later and woke up an hour later on the weekend. It is likely that fewer work and social events allowed people to keep more consistent bed and wake times.

Figure 2



Trimmed Means reported Bottary et al. (2021). *J Sleep Res.*

Not everyone was able to get better sleep during COVID-19. Researchers have speculated on potential reasons for **why COVID-19 may have improved sleep and mental health in some individuals**:

- Reduced morning preparation and commute time (increased schedule flexibility if able to work from home)
- Reduced social and occupational demands that typically interfere with sleep timing and consistency
- Financial gains for those that were able to maintain work and for those that received stimulus checks
- Avoidance of unpleasant news
- Utilization of coping strategies
- Utilization of virtual socializing and/or “quaran-teams”

More research is needed to confirm these speculations. Regardless, **it is important to recognize that pressing the brakes on our fast-paced lifestyle has benefited sleep health.** COVID-19 reduced the

competition for our sleep. Businesses, schools, and activities are returning to their regularly scheduled programming. **As we continue our journey toward “normal”, the improvements we have made in our sleep habits are under increasing threat.** We should use this as an opportunity to educate politicians, employers, employees, school officials, teachers, students, patients, colleagues, family, and friends on the burden that pre-COVID society placed on our sleep health. We are beginning to rebuild and restructure a post-COVID world. Now is the time to promote social and occupational systems that will allow us to prioritize our sleep.

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