

Abstract

Background: During the Coronavirus pandemic, a mental health pandemic emerged, with frontline healthcare workers' arguably being the most affected. In South Africa, however, the sociohistorical background must be considered, as this virus poses a new threat to a country that has suffered a series of collective traumas.

Aim: This study explored the qualitative, lived experiences of frontline healthcare workers in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method: A lifeworld phenomenological framework was used in this study. Semi-structured interviews with 11 frontline healthcare workers were conducted as part of a broader study focused on the mental health of South African healthcare workers' during COVID-19. The information gathered was analysed using the principles of reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: This research showed that the lived experiences of frontline workers' during the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa are diverse and peppered with paradoxes. The findings revealed that working during COVID-19 is an emotional rollercoaster, that it is emotionally and mentally tiring, that there are concerns with the Department of Health and that COVID-19 has had a substantial influence on daily living. In addition, the data also demonstrate that the concept of a 'front-line' healthcare worker altered throughout the pandemic as a result of task shifting as healthcare personnel took on different responsibilities, moving them to the 'frontline.'

Conclusion: This study adds to the body of knowledge about mental health and the working environment of health professionals during COVID-19. It also highlights the need to understand healthcare workers' lived experience using qualitative methodologies, which has provided depth and new insights into the multiple realities of healthcare workers on the frontline.

Keywords: mental health, frontline healthcare workers', South Africa, lived experiences, COVID-19, pandemics, mental disorders, delivery of Health Care