

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH TELECONSULTATIONS

A WHITEPAPER BY ALTIBBI.COM, THE LEADING  
TELEHEALTH PLATFORM IN THE MENA REGION

## Introduction

Since the emergence of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in late 2019, the face of healthcare around the world has changed. The disease has proven to be a burden on healthcare in different parts of the world, increasing demands on healthcare providers, healthcare facilities, and personal protective equipment (PPE). The declaration of the disease by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic has pushed governments and institutions around the world to take extra measures to control the spread of COVID-19. Such measures included forcing lockdowns, establishing quarantine zones, and launching COVID-19 hotlines to provide help and awareness to the public.

COVID-19 has been a threat to the physical health of individuals, causing symptoms and complications ranging from simple fever and cough to debilitating pneumonia and respiratory failure. The need for Intensive Care Units (ICUs) and ventilators spiked, and the shortage in certain parts of the world had taken its toll on many countries and economies.

On the other hand, COVID-19 has also had an impact on the mental health of individuals, triggering anxieties, phobias, and general feelings of dismay. The necessary measures taken by governments have intensified this impact, with individuals spending sequential days at home or at a quarantine unit, sensing their mental health going downhill. The disease scare has also contributed to the overall impact on mental health, as individuals have frequently consulted doctors about worries or concerns whether trivial symptoms they were experiencing were diagnostic of COVID-19.

Instructions on maintaining proper hygiene were also a strong contributing factor to the scare. Individuals would clean their hands repeatedly and intensively, triggering obsessive and compulsive behaviour that was not present in said individuals prior to the pandemic.

Altibbi.com is a telehealth platform that offers the ability to consult doctors remotely about any health complaint, be it physical or mental, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It is the leading telemedicine platform in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with over 10,000 consultations daily.

This paper will showcase mental health consultations from Altibbi.com users, divided on the basis of year and region. To unify variables, this paper will compare numbers between the months of March, April and May for 2019 and 2020 in each of Egypt, Jordan and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

# Numbers and Statistics

This paper compares the three-month period of March, April and May for both 2019 and 2020. For this purpose, conditions will include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and panic-related disorders.

Comparing 2019 to 2020, mental health consultations have increased from 288 consultations during the aforementioned timeframe in 2019, to 3295 consultations for the same timeframe in 2020 (Figure 1). Males contributed to the majority of consulting users in 2019 (64%), whereas 54% of consulting users in 2020 were females (Figure 2).

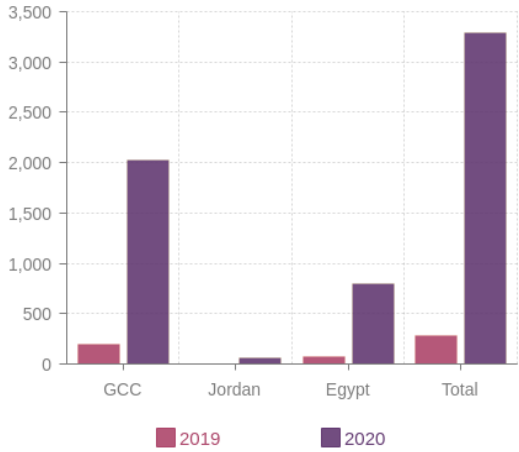


Figure 1 - Mental Health Consultations in March, April and May for 2019 and 2020, divided by region.

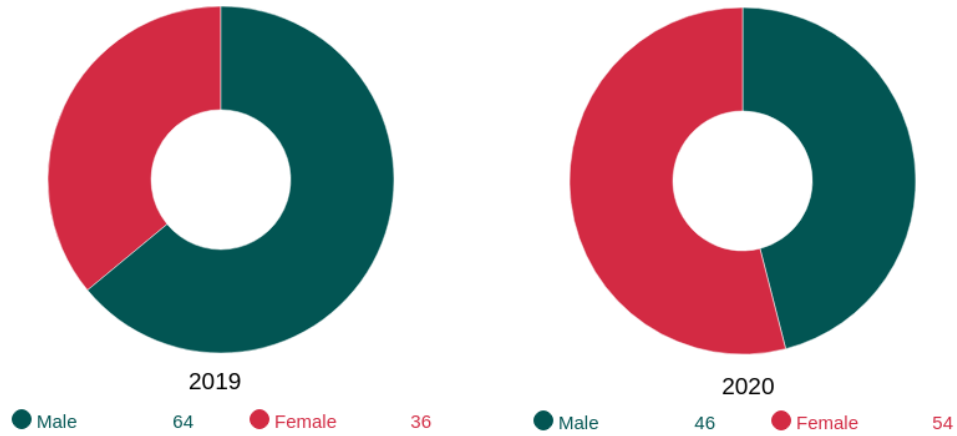


Figure 2 - Gender of consulting users for March, April and May, for both 2019 and 2020

The majority of mental health consultations for 2019 were those related to depression and anxiety, each comprising 39% of mental health consultations in the aforementioned timeframe. In 2020, anxiety-related consultations alone comprised the majority with a percentage of 44%. Consultations for phobia and panic disorders have increased significantly in 2020 compared to 2019, where consultations for phobia have increased from 21 to 173 consultations, and those for panic disorders have increased from 11 to 165 consultations (Figure 3).

The three-month timeframe in 2020 shows an incremental trend in anxiety-related consultations. 346 consultations in March 2020 were anxiety-related. This number has increased to 532 in April, and 617 in May (Figure 4).

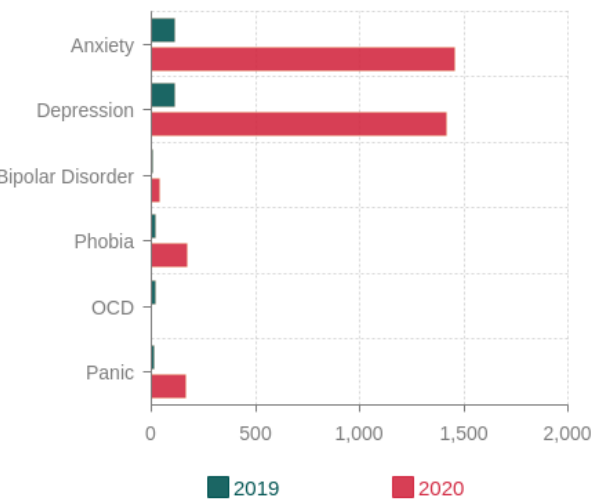


Figure 3 - Mental Health Consultations for March, April and May for both 2019 and 2020, divided by diagnosis

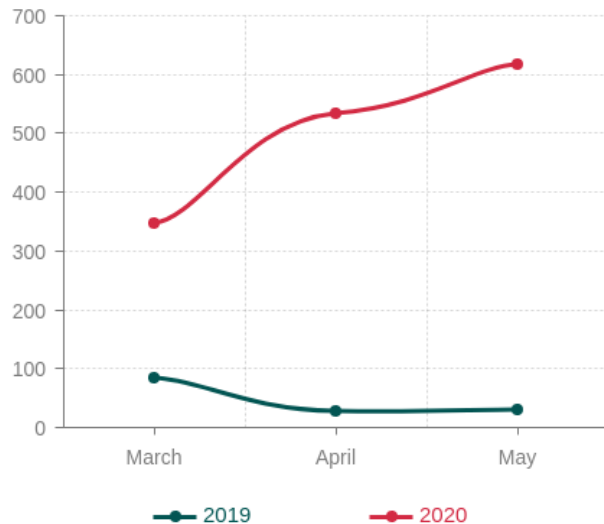


Figure 4 - Anxiety-related consultations for March, April and May for both 2019 and 2020

As for demographics, the majority of consultations came from users in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries for both 2019 and 2020, where 69% of mental health consultations in 2019 came from GCC users, and 61% of mental health consultations in 2020 came from the Gulf as well (Figure 5).

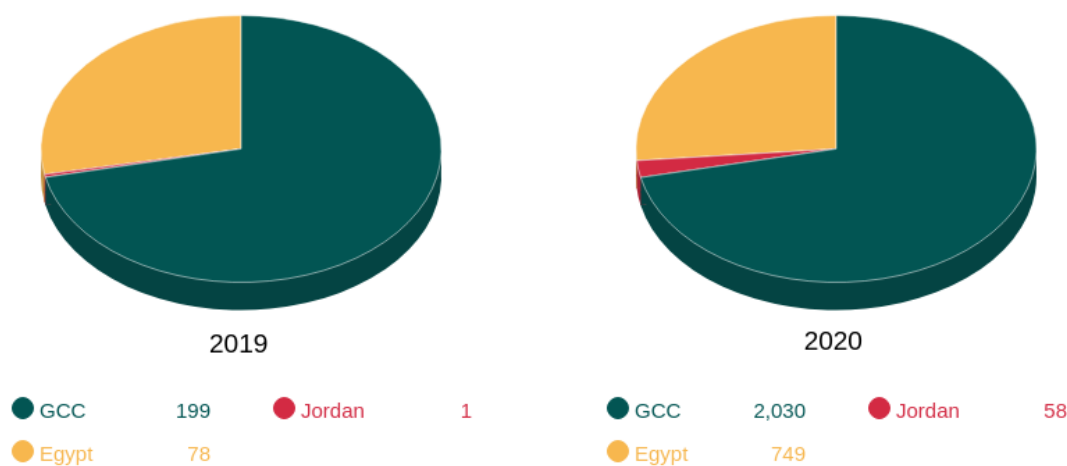


Figure 5 - Mental Health Consultations in March, April and May for both 2019 and 2020, divided by region

## Thoughts and Recommendations

Telehealth provides a safe alternative for traditional healthcare, especially in settings of infectious diseases. Utilizing telehealth decreases exposure to potential foci of infection spread and minimizes the workload of healthcare providers, providing more time and effort to care for those who need hospitalization.

Access to mental healthcare remains an issue in the MENA region, as counseling is still stigmatized and remains somewhat an expensive service or deemed as “luxurious” and therefore remains uncovered by the majority of insurance plans. Altibbi offers a convenient and suitable alternative, where mood and anxiety disorders are considered a part of general practice, and users have the ability to seek counseling with Altibbi’s network of general practitioners, ensuring affordable and completely private counseling.

In the setting of a pandemic like COVID-19, leaving one’s house to a traditional therapy session might be, by itself, a triggering activity. For such individuals, remote counseling is a more suitable option. It offers more flexibility, as well as a more comfortable therapy environment, especially for those who find it difficult to open up to therapists in person or have concerns regarding their anonymity.

Since physical examination has little role in therapy and mental health counseling, telemedicine is a very appropriate setting for it. We at Altibbi.com recommend healthcare institutions to invest in telehealth and telemedicine, as it reduces the burden and cost of healthcare, and provides a more flexible and convenient pathway of seeking medical care.