Fact Sheet: The Impact of Pandemic Disease on Mental Health
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Plagues in History

- Human beings are no strangers to epidemic disease. Recorded history is pockmarked with epidemics, many of them so severe that historians point to them as shapers of major world events.¹

The Plague of Athens (430 – 426 BC) killed over 25% of the Athenian population (approx. 100,000 people). Prior to the epidemic, Athens had been the strongest city-state in Greece, but the social, economic, and military collapse triggered by the epidemic contributed to the loss of the Peloponnesian war. Afterward, Athens was reduced to a state of near-complete subjection, and never regained its pre-war prosperity.²

The Antonine Plague (165 – 180 AD) destroyed as much as one-third of the Roman population and decimated the Roman army, likely creating the conditions for the decline of the Roman Empire.³

The Plague of Justinian (541 – 542 BC) the Bubonic Plague, killed 10,000 people per day for four months when it struck Constantinople.⁴ Carried by rats along caravan trading routes, the disease established a regular cycle of infection throughout the Mediterranean. By 500 BC, an estimated 25–100 million people had perished, reducing the population of the Byzantine Empire by around 40%.⁵ The losses left the Mediterranean open to invasion, and the center of European civilization subsequently shifted to the north.⁶

The Black Death (1347 – 1671 AD) brought intermittent waves of bubonic plague to Europe, the first of which killed between 30 and 60% of the population. All told, the

⁴ McNeil, W. 141.
⁶ McNeil, W. 142.
“great pestilence” carried off 75-200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa. In the labor shortages that followed, wages increased and commoners came to enjoy more freedom. The subsequent decline of serfdom and emergence of the Renaissance may have been directly related.

7 Aberth, J. (2010). From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages (second ed.). Routledge