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Researchers: Pandemic, colder weather hard on mental health of older adults

Stuart Peddle | December 3, 2021



HALIFAX, N.S. — If you find yourself feeling down after nearly two weeks of gloomy weather and the ongoing pandemic sapping your energy, rest assured, you're not alone.

New research into the effects of COVID-19 on people 50 and older shows the pandemic contributed to increased depression that has only gotten worse.

Dalhousie University's Susan Kirkland was part of a team of Canadian researchers who found that 43 per cent of people in the age group experienced worsening mental health issues from the onset of the pandemic through the end of 2020.

The study was published Nov. 25 in the journal Nature Aging.

“I think we all have anecdotal experiences of what the pandemic has been like in terms of mental health, but it's a very different thing to really substantiate that,” Kirkland said in a recent interview.

Data came from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging, which has been following 50,000 Canadians since 2010. The men and women in the study were between the ages of 45 and 85 when they started. Follow-ups were done every three years.

“We followed them on a number of different aspects – their physical health, their mental health, their social health, their psychological health as well as understanding genetics,” said Kirkland, head of the university’s department of community health and epidemiology. “And so we have a number of points in time where we know what their mental health was like.”

"Sometimes anecdotally what you hear is that anxiety and depression were very, very high in the initial stages of the pandemic but then people eventually became used to it, but in fact, that's not what we found in our study. We found that not only did depression rates remain elevated, but they continued to increase over time."

- Susan Kirland, head of Dalhousie University's department of community health and edpidemiology

In particular, the researchers measured a screening tool for depression called the Centre for Epidemiological Screening – Depression, or CES-D-10. This is a self-reporting tool that asks subjects about depression symptoms.

The researchers gathered data from when the pandemic first hit in the spring of 2020 and then again, more intensively, after about eight months and re-did the depression scale in the latter part of 2020.

“And what we found was that ... older adults were severely affected by aspects of the pandemic,” Kirkland said.

“And what's interesting is that the rates were higher than in the pre-pandemic stage and they continued to increase over time.

“And this is something that we really didn't appreciate. Sometimes anecdotally what you hear is that anxiety and depression were very, very high in the initial stages of the pandemic but then people eventually became used to it, but in fact, that's not what we found in our study. We found that not only did depression rates remain elevated, but they continued to increase over time.”

Researchers looked to see if particular people were more vulnerable to certain aspects and what they heard through the pandemic was that there are inequities that persist and become greater, Kirkland said.

“So people who reported that they were lonely in the pre-pandemic – or who rated high in loneliness in the pre-pandemic period – were the ones who experienced the greatest amount of depression during the pandemic.”

Adding in what happens to many when fall starts to give way to winter also contributes to a dark picture.



Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor in Dalhousie's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience and Department of Psychiatry, said how weather affects mood can be very individualized.

“We've got it kind of tough here in Canada, from a weather standpoint,” he said. “We're awfully north and that can really affect our mood. In fact, in a place like Canada, maybe two to three per cent of Canadians will have a diagnosable seasonal affective disorder, in other words a mental disorder tied to the changing of the seasons and the arrival of winter in a place like Canada. But an even higher prevalence will be somewhere between maybe 12 to 15 per cent of Canadians who will have what we may call the winter blues.”

SAD is eight times more likely to occur in women than men and primarily affects adults rather than children or teens.

Sherry said depression leads a person to be sedentary, unmotivated, passive and sitting around expending little energy.

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- clinical psychologist and Dalhousie professor Simon Sherry

"You're not reaching out to people, you're not going places, you're not doing things, so maybe with the arrival of winter, our bodies and brains give up more physiologically extensive activities like going places, doing things, having adventures and get more into a hibernation state."

Some people will start a medication around the changing of the season, Sherry said, like an antidepressant. Others could engage in light therapy, exposing yourself to a high-intensity light daily.

"I think a simpler strategy that could be effective for those struggling with the winter blahs may be to manipulate your natural exposure to sunlight. Open those curtains, change the position of your desk. If you're working from home, when are your windows (getting) sun exposure and can you move from one location at 10 a.m. to another at 2 so as to increase your exposure to sunlight? Can you install a skylight or create other opportunities to light up your life and increase your natural exposure to sunlight?"

Some need to change their behaviour to offset the difficulties. One viable option is to seek the help of a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

"Depression renders you inactive," Sherry said. "Seasonal changes and mood tend to render you inactive. It gets you sitting about, festering and ruminating and brooding and doing little. And so that's where I believe the increased openness of our society starts to become useful, because to counteract depression, you need to go places and do things. You need to seek out activities and adventures that have a high potential to be pleasant, positive and rewarding."

Now that there are more opportunities in a vaccinated world to go out to interact, see people, go places and do things, Sherry thinks it's a critically important strategy to keep the winter blahs at bay.

That also resonates with Kirkland's research, she said, because loneliness is one of the biggest factors determining depression among seniors.