

New study finds 'frightening' rise in suicidal thinking, behaviour

Dalhousie University researchers released a study that shows the rate of suicidal thinking during the pandemic has more than doubled worldwide

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A new study published by a group of Dalhousie University researchers shows a major rise in people thinking about suicide, suicide attempts and self-harm during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dalhousie University's Sherry Stewart, Justin Dubé and Simon Sherry worked on the study.

The researchers rounded up all the available research on this subject which came to a total of 54 studies of more than 300,000 participants worldwide.

"In terms of what the analysis yielded, we've seen a frightening increase in thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts and self-harm during the pandemic when you compare it to pre-pandemic levels," Sherry said.

As an example, the rate of suicidal thinking during the pandemic has more than doubled; around 11 per cent of people are actively thinking of death by suicide.

"COVID-19 has created an enormous amount of psychological pain that comes out in various ways," Sherry said. "It might look like depression, anxiety, isolation, loneliness and so forth.

"When people start to hurt like that, they start to engage in suicidal behaviours."

He also said mental illness and suicide are closely tied together. More than 90 per cent of the people who have died by suicide lived with mental illness, most commonly depression.

"There's a very close tie between mental illness and suicidal behaviour," he said. "When people become more mentally ill, suicide comes to mind more often."

Sherry, who's also a psychologist at CRUX Psychology, added that most people are willing to talk about suicidal thinking, as long as the topics are approached respectfully and compassionately.

When talking to someone about their suicidal thinking, the person must be able to fully explore the depths of their pain rather than pull away when it gets tough.

"Even people in great pain feel ambivalent about dying," he said. "Part of them wants to die and escape the pain that they're suffering, and the other part of them is almost programmed innately to keep living."

Prior to the pandemic, there was already a crisis related to suicide in Nova Scotia. Roughly every 72 hours, someone in Nova Scotia dies by suicide.

For a moment, that [crisis was "delayed" in Nova Scotia](#) in 2020; the number of suicides recorded in the province that year were the lowest since 2014.

Nova Scotia also released an updated framework last year called [Preventing and Reducing the Risk of Suicide](#).

That framework builds upon the previous 2006 framework, aims to enhance the understanding of suicide in the province and highlights what work can be done.

According to the document, 1,124 Nova Scotians died by suicide between 2007 and 2016. Out of those, 77 per cent were men while 23 per cent were women.

But Sherry said Nova Scotia needs a further plan with funding and timelines to help alleviate the situation.

"It's time for Nova Scotia to get real when it comes to suicide," he said. "We need an actual, funded plan with definite timelines and fixed amounts of money that can be devoted to this problem.

"There is compelling evidence that suicide can be prevented. To think otherwise is a myth."