

# The Chronicle Herald

## Study: Rate of suicidal thoughts nearly doubled during pandemic

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Lesley Huska, Wellness Coordinator with the Healthy Minds Cooperative, has seen first-hand how the pandemic restrictions led to feelings of loneliness, isolation and powerlessness. - Tim Krochak

HALIFAX, N.S. — New research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions applied to deal with it have left some people in a dark place.

A meta-analysis study recently published in the *Psychiatry Research* journal found that the rate of those experiencing suicidal thoughts, actions and self-harm rose from about 5.8 per cent to more than 11 per cent.

Lesley Huska is an HRM-area woman who has had her own “lived experience,” and wants to let people know they are not alone.

“What I experienced through a global pandemic, living through COVID-19 has been, like most people, I think, feelings of isolation, loneliness, helplessness, powerlessness,” Huska said. “And those are just like symptoms for many mental disorders, some of which I have – a depressive disorder.”

In an online interview this week, Huska said she had felt somewhat prepared when the pandemic first hit Nova Scotia in March 2020 because she had gone through different therapies that have helped equip her to live with a mental health disorder where she experiences those feelings from time to time.

“However, as we went through (the) lockdown, second lockdown, third lockdown, there was no true hope in sight and I think that added additional stressors which really brought about, for me, just lethargy and a lack of joy,” the Wellness Coordinator with the Healthy Minds Cooperative said.

When there's no end in sight, it feels really hopeless, Huska said. But she was able to identify what everyone was living through,

But not everyone is equipped in how to handle mental health issues or challenges, and Huska said she saw many people “spinning” who don't identify with having mental health challenges.

Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, conducted the study with his research group, including colleagues Justin Dube, Sherry Stewart, Martin M. Smith and Paul Hewitt.

Pandemic-driven psychological pain is now all around us, Sherry said in a recent telephone interview.

“And when you have so many people around who are in psychological pain, people start to engage in suicide behaviours.”

The meta-analysis, or a study of studies, looked at the results of other studies across the globe and examined the evidence.

The research identified 54 different studies totalling more than 300,000 participants from around the world, allowing the researchers to get a “big-picture” look at suicidal behaviours during the pandemic.

“And what we found was nothing short of alarming,” Sherry said. “There was a major increase in thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts and self-harm during the pandemic.”

The almost doubling of pre-pandemic levels was “stark,” he said.

“In fact, I've been studying suicide for 20 years and it is almost inconceivable that in this short a period of time that we would see such a large increase on a massive scale.”

Sherry also said the results may be an under-estimate because they were only able to study research up to November 2020.

Another factor that came to light is that the impact on suicidal thoughts and behaviour is not equally or randomly distributed.

Certain groups were especially vulnerable, Sherry said. In particular, younger people, women and people from democratic countries like Canada or the U.S. were especially prone to experiencing thoughts of suicide.

“Closer to home in terms of that crisis, we lose one Nova Scotian on average to suicide every 72 hours,” Sherry said.

“So we have a suicide crisis in our province, where for many years now, roughly 120 to 140 people die by suicide every year. And between 2000-2012, Nova Scotia actually had the fastest-growing suicide rate of any province in Canada.”

One of the goals of the study to inform targeted interventions.

“We need to dispense with the myth that suicide is not preventable. There is ample and compelling evidence to suggest that death by suicide can be prevented. Some of the most promising interventions occur at a population health level.”

Sherry said a key factor in preventing suicide is to tell someone who is responsible, who loves you and to start to seek help.

“I don't want ... for there to be a doom and gloom narrative,” he said. “Death by suicide in this time period is stoppable. It is far from inevitable. Suicide is absolutely preventable. The vast majority of people, as much as we have been demoralized by this pandemic, are still resilient and adaptive and resourceful.”

Huska said she was not surprised or alarmed by the statistics in the study, “because at any time in my life where I have felt like I did not want to be alive anymore, when I had thoughts of suicide – or if you want to get fancy, suicidal ideation – it came in times where I felt like there was no hope in my future and I would like to relay, if possible, through you somehow that, for anyone out there who has experienced or is experiencing thoughts of suicide, I would like them to know that there is nothing wrong with them.”

She said it's OK to feel those feelings but it's not OK to take steps toward them.

“Mental illness, including anything to do with thoughts of suicide is not a weakness or a character flaw,” she said.

“It's OK to feel thoughts of suicide, it's OK to have them, but suicide doesn't end pain because there are people left who will feel that pain (of your loss) for the rest of their lives. And the reason I didn't act on it was because I knew there would be pain left behind.”

Huska also encouraged anyone experiencing suicidal thoughts to reach out for help and talk about it. You don't have to suffer by yourself.

“Our feelings are not facts. And eventually, our feelings will change. They always do. They are fickle. And so to do something in a moment where you feel like there's no hope is an intense feeling, but those feelings are not dictating your next steps in life, you are.

“We can learn how to live well despite hard things.”

### **Resources:**

- Healthy Minds Co-operative website: [healthyminds.ca](http://healthyminds.ca)
- Nova Scotia Mental Health and Addictions Crisis help line: HRM: (902) 429-8167, Toll-free in Nova Scotia: 1-888-429-8167, website: [mha.nshealth.ca/en](http://mha.nshealth.ca/en)
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868, or Text CONNECT to 686868
- Canadian Mental Health Association: [novascotia.cmha.ca](http://novascotia.cmha.ca)