



11 million Canadians could experience 'high levels of stress' due to COVID-19: Health Canada



BY MEGHAN COLLIE GLOBAL NEWS May 21, 2020

As Canadians continue to stay home to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, prolonged isolation and worry about the pandemic has begun to take a toll on mental health.

In fact, it's estimated that roughly 11 million Canadians will experience "high levels of stress in family and work settings," according to Health Canada data revealed to Global News. Close to two million Canadians are predicted to show signs of "traumatic stress."

These estimates are based on the effects of the SARS outbreak in 2003.

"Following the SARS outbreak, it was reported that more than 40 per cent of the population reported increased levels of stress in family and work settings during the outbreak, with 16 per cent showing signs of traumatic stress levels," said a spokesperson for Health Canada.

Experts are worried about the mental health impacts of the pandemic, which are anticipated to affect society in numerous ways long after the COVID-19 outbreak is contained.

"What I think we're facing here is a very traumatic event for a lot of people," mental health strategist and speaker Mark Henick previously told Global News.

"It's a traumatic societal event for people. And one thing that we know about trauma is that while it's happening, you do whatever you can do to survive."

As provinces begin to reopen, Henick anticipates “residual stress, depression ... financial pressures, learning how to re-engage with the world in [a] new way.”

“That’s going to be difficult for a lot of people,” Henick said. “And those are exactly the kinds of risk factors that lead to increasing rates of depression, anxiety and even suicide.”

That’s why the federal government created Wellness Together Canada, an online portal intended to provide Canadians with free resources, tools and professional support services to help with mental health.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced an investment of \$240.5 million to develop and expand the portal.

The tools in the portal are intended to offer Canadians “different levels of support” depending on their needs. It also has the ability to directly connect Canadians with mental health service providers.

“There are more than 6,000 service providers employed with Homewood Health and Kids Help Phone who will deliver psycho-social support services via text and call,” said the Health Canada spokesperson.

“While the exact provider mix is not available at this time, the service providers cover a range of health professions, including social work and psychology, with diverse backgrounds: counselling psychology, clinical social work, rehabilitation, crisis management, child psychology/neuropsychology, sexuality, adolescence issues, marital/family therapy, and substance use.”

The portal will be “closely monitored” to meet the demands of Canadians, read the statement.

Loneliness and mental health

Loneliness has been shown to have an effect on a person’s physical and mental health.

“There is some research linking loneliness with adverse health consequences: increased levels of stress, depression and anxiety have been reported, [and] social isolation has also been linked to poorer quality sleep,” registered psychologist Melanie Badali previously told Global News.

“There are also some links to problems with cognitive functioning ... [as well as] poorer cardiovascular function and immune system functioning.”

The good news: being alone does not have to be synonymous with loneliness, said Badali.

“Loneliness is about people’s levels of satisfaction with their connectedness or their perceived social isolation,” she said. “It’s possible to be physically isolated right now and not feel lonely.”

Luckily, technology is an easy way to maintain social connections — something Badali recommends to Canadians as the pandemic wears on.

“Now, more than ever before in our history, we can connect to other people through verbal and nonverbal communication channels in ways that do not require physical contact or proximity,” she said.

Use technology wisely

It’s one thing to use technology to stay connected with friends and family; it’s another to spend your time in isolation endlessly scrolling through social media.

Being plugged into the news every hour of every day is a “major factor” in mental and physical health, registered psychologist Simon Sherry previously told Global News.

One 2018 study found that “compulsive media use” triggered social media fatigue, ultimately leading to elevated anxiety and depression.

“Increased screen time [can cause] anxiety, distractibility and loneliness,” Sherry said.

When this is all compounded by fear and anxiety over COVID-19, Sherry said people experience a sort of “digital distortion.”

“The distortion being that people are being flooded with negative, threatening, panic-inducing information and that information is becoming over-represented in their mind,” Sherry said.

“This is a problem of too much information.”

The number one way you can improve your mental health is to choose carefully the media you interact with on a day-to-day basis.

“There’s credible media coverage, but there’s also a different sort of less credible media coverage. Panic sells,” Sherry said.

“I think we need to be careful how much we expose people to ... you don’t need to be updated about every cough or sneeze.”

Sherry recommends limiting your exposure to a few credible sources of information, and only accessing those sources once per day.

“It’s difficult to think rationally and respond proportionately when you’re engrossed in panic-inducing social media,” Sherry said.

“You can end up talking ceaselessly about COVID-19, often with no constructive purpose. That type of behaviour ... is going to maintain — if not exacerbate — fear, anxiety and panic.”

Sherry admits it can be difficult to avoid social media, but says individuals can make the choice to “control their response” and “limit their exposure” to social media.

“Social media is leading to an overestimation of the actual danger,” he said.

“Clearly there’s a threat here, but that threat ... becomes inflated. I think that social media is leading people to overestimate the dangers, exaggerate the threat

Other ways to care for your mental health

For many, the COVID-19 outbreak means fewer face-to-face connections and more time alone. For those who live with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues, being asked to stay at home can cause further panic.

If you know someone stuck at home or self-isolating living with mental health issues, it is important to check in on them, Kate Mulligan, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health, previously told Global News.

“We can also point people in our communities and our friends to existing resources that are out there,” she said, adding that a mental health hotline is a good place to start.

There are several things people who are feeling more anxiety during this time period can do, Maneet Bhatia, a clinical psychologist based in Toronto, previously told Global News. For starters, we need to accept what being at home actually means.

“Accept that you cannot control everything and focus on that which is in your control,” he said.

“There is a lot of information available to us, so it is important to focus on the facts ... rely on health and public officials and sources from credible outlets.”

Where to find help

If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs help, resources are available. In case of an emergency, please call 911 for immediate help.

The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, Depression Hurts and Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 all offer ways of getting help if you, or someone you know, may be suffering from mental health issues.

Questions about COVID-19? Here are some things you need to know:

Health officials caution against all international travel. Returning travellers are legally obligated to self-isolate for 14 days, beginning March 26, in case they develop symptoms and to prevent spreading the virus to others. Some provinces and territories have also implemented additional recommendations or enforcement measures to ensure those returning to the area self-isolate.

Symptoms can include fever, cough and difficulty breathing — very similar to a cold or flu. Some people can develop a more severe illness. People most at risk of this include older adults and people with severe chronic medical conditions like heart, lung or kidney disease. If you develop symptoms, contact public health authorities.

To prevent the virus from spreading, experts recommend frequent handwashing and coughing into your sleeve. They also recommend minimizing contact with others, staying home as much as possible and maintaining a distance of two metres from other people if you go out.

— *With files from Emanuela Campanella*