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How COVID-19 pandemic is mostly detrimental, but sometimes a blessing to people's mental health

Nebal Snan

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Eliese MacKinnon holds up one of her favourite Christmas ornaments as she starts to decorate the tree at her mother's Monday. MacKinnon says COVID-19 has exacerbated her pre-existing mental health conditions. - Eric Wynne

When Nova Scotia went into lockdown in March, Eliese MacKinnon thought she would fit right in with the new imposed stay-at-home lifestyle.

"At first, I was like, wow this is exciting ... because it's a real excuse for me not to leave the house," she said.

MacKinnon lives with a number of mental health issues, including agoraphobia, an anxiety disorder where people fear and avoid places or situations that might cause them to panic and make them feel trapped, helpless, or embarrassed.

She said she usually gets anxious whenever she has to step outside the house and feels guilty when she decides to stay at home, but with the lockdown she had no choice.

"I'm like this will work perfect for my agoraphobia because now I won't have that guilt feeling that I normally have," said MacKinnon, who is in her 40s.

But MacKinnon was quick to find the opposite.

"It actually made everything worse," she said. "Now it's even harder to leave the house than it was before."

For one thing, MacKinnon was afraid she would get COVID-19 if she left the house especially during the first couple of months during the pandemic. She has pre-existing pulmonary issues that could increase the severity of the disease if she were to get it.

Months of not interacting with people also exacerbated her social anxiety.

"Now when I do interact with people, (the anxiety) is worse than it was beforehand."



MacKinnon said people should seek professional support or support from friends and family during the holidays. - Eric Wynne

'I've truly lost who I am'

For Haillie Hersey, the isolation continues to be a setback in her recovery from addiction.

"Part of my recovery plan was to open up my support and friend circle," she said. "This is also a really hard thing for me to do on a good day, so now that the (family bubble) is in place, I feel extra alone."

Hersey, who also lives with anxiety and depression, said all her coping mechanisms went down the drain during the pandemic. One of the things that make her happy is volunteering, but she hasn't been able to find places that are taking new volunteers.

"My coping skill is staying busy and that was taken away from me," she said. "I feel like I've truly lost who I am during this time."

Not being in control of when to leave the house and where to go has also been triggering for Hersey.

Hersey and MacKinnon are not alone. Dr. Simon Sherry, clinical psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, said there's a lot of evidence suggesting that "COVID-19 is very corrosive to mental health."

Limiting social activities and staying at home unless necessary are essential to curb the spread of COVID-19. But they unintentionally contribute to social isolation and behavioural avoidance, two conditions people with mental health issues already struggle with.

Sherry defined social isolation as having few tangible social and emotional supports available to a person, such as having no one or few people to talk to.

Behavioural avoidance is "a tendency to shrink away from the world to live within a small space."



Dr. Simon Sherry, psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, said evidence shows that COVID-19 pandemic has mostly had a detrimental effect on Canadians' mental health - Nebal Snan

Sherry said the hibernation-like state where some people have stopped going outside during the pandemic can lead people to further shrink away from the world and not seek support.

"You can see this if you were already anxious and fearful about heading into the world, staying at home during the pandemic, knowing that there are dangers or risks that are invisible out there, has only strengthened and reinforced your avoidance."

Sherry said people should try to go out and participate in the world as much as possible within public health guidelines.

He added that all the extra time alone means more time to think about our problems, which makes them grow bigger in our heads. Hersey experienced that first-hand.

"I tend to spiral out of control with my thinking. ... It did lead to a relapse," she said.

MacKinnon knows too well what it's like to lose her coping mechanisms, too.

She's lived with some of her mental health issues since childhood and was able to manage them. She said although she struggled, she still had several jobs and maintained friendships.

"Before where I could work through it, it was manageable," she said. "Now it's almost completely debilitating."

MacKinnon now asks her mom to come with her to take out the garbage or check her mail.

"The thought of leaving the house initially is so stressful that I need literal support to leave the house," said MacKinnon.

"Thankfully, she lives in the same apartment building with me."



Being an introvert, Samuel Mundy said the pandemic has been beneficial to his mental health. - Eric Wynne

Pandemic curses some, blesses some

People's personality traits play a role in how they're affected by the pandemic.

"It's my consistent observation that this pandemic is especially difficult for extroverts," said Sherry.

"People have different social saturation points. Some people can be quite content with one or two social interactions per day, but by disposition, extroverts prefer and seek out opportunities to affiliate."

A minority could even find meaning while working from home and now prefer it to being cooped up in an office and long commutes.

"I think some people have found that ... a quieter life at a slower pace is actually conducive to their emotional well being."

Samuel Mundy, who's lived with anxiety and depression all his life, is one of those people. He said more people communicating and shopping online during the pandemic has been beneficial to his mental health.

It's more normal now for Mundy to tell friends that he wants to chat online instead of going to visit.

He also doesn't have to spend hours thinking over whether he said the right thing to the cashier at the grocery store.

"A lot of (my anxiety and depression) comes from social interaction of the day-to-day," said Mundy. "The lockdown in general took me out of a lot of these environments that usually would be harmful for me."

Mundy and his partner are also happy to be saving on gas and food.

He's also finally found the time to work on his hobbies, which include making music, and cosplay.

"I was able to do so much in such a short amount of ... months. It was really satisfying."

Support is impersonal

While both Hersey and MacKinnon attend bi-weekly appointments with their therapists, they both said support is different post COVID-19.

Hersey was moved from weekly in-person appointments to bi-weekly phone calls.

Speaking to a therapist over the phone is less personal and, for Hersey, it can be difficult to concentrate.

“There were times I needed to go to a hospital due to intrusive thoughts, but forced myself to sit with it instead,” said Hersey.

MacKinnon said she felt phone sessions are not as effective as those done in-person.

“I find on the phone there’s a disconnect,” she said. “You can’t see them. You can’t gauge their reactions or tell how good they’re listening ... It doesn’t make me feel comfortable enough to cry and open up which is a lot of my relief feeling that I get from therapy.”

Still, MacKinnon said people should seek therapy if they need help, especially those who might be spending the holidays alone.

For those spending time with family or friends within public health guidelines, Sherry said to maintain yearly traditions as much as possible and focus on enjoying the experience as opposed to the excessive consumerism that usually comes with the holiday season.

What COVID-19 has exposed more than anything are the cracks in the mental health system. Sherry said there’s a need for an action plan with appropriate funding to improve access to mental health services and evidence-based treatments.

Resources if you need help

- Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line: 1-888-429-8167
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868, text CONNECT to 686868, or available to chat on Facebook Messenger

If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs immediate assistance:

- Contact the Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team at 1-902-429-8167 or 1-888-429-8167 (toll-free)
- Go to the nearest hospital or
- Call 911