

# COVID-19 social distancing having significant impacts on mental health, study shows

April 20 2020, by Mike Addelman

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An early draft of a study by researchers at The University of Manchester and Swansea University shows social distancing and isolation is having significant impacts on people's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

The study has been submitted for publication to *BMJ Open* and published online as part of an open science initiative. It found that:

- Social distancing is leading to heightened feelings of anxiety and depression amongst the general public.
- People in low-paid or insecure occupations experienced the greatest impact.
- Some people are fearful they will experience health or social anxiety after the lockdown, while others plan to go back to normal levels of social activity as soon as possible.

The research is being led by Dr. Simon Williams, public health researcher at Swansea University, in collaboration with Dr. Kimberly Dienes and Professor Christopher Armitage of The University of Manchester's Centre for Health Psychology, and Dr. Tova Tampe, an independent consultant at the World Health Organization.

The researchers conducted five online focus groups from across the United Kingdom in the early stages of the UK's COVID-19 lockdown.

The groups explored their views and experiences. Even after as little as two weeks, people were struggling with the loss of social interaction.

Dr. Williams said: "Remarkable efforts are being made by the public to contain the spread of the COVID-19, and these efforts should continue as long as is necessary. Our study finds many people are really sticking to the guidelines on social distancing. However, it is coming at a significant cost to people's mental health and wellbeing, particularly those in low-paid or insecure jobs.

"A rapid response is necessary in terms of public health programming to mitigate these mental health impacts. Waiting to provide support until after social distancing and isolation measures are relaxed or removed

could have potentially devastating and lasting impacts on mental health, especially among those already socially and economically vulnerable."

Dr. Dienes, a clinical and health psychologist, said: "One of the key themes was a feeling of loss. For some, [social distancing](#) has meant a loss of income. For others it has meant a loss of structure and routine as people struggle to balance working from home with childcare. For everyone it has meant a loss of face-to-face social interaction. Our study shows how these physical losses are having a knock-on effect in the form of emotional 'losses,' such as a loss of self-worth, loss of motivation and a loss of meaning in daily life."

The study also provides early evidence on how people might behave after the current lockdown ends, something that will influence how much and how quickly COVID-19 will continue to spread.

Dr. Williams added: "One of the big stressors for people was the fact they do not know how long the lockdown will last. It is possible that people will be less supportive and less compliant the longer this continues. Although some people are worried they will still be anxious about socializing for some time after the lockdown ends, others are already planning lots of social activities as soon as they are able. Government needs to take this into consideration as they plan their [lockdown](#) exit strategy.

**More information:** Simon N Williams et al. Public perceptions and experiences of social distancing and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic: A UK-based focus group study, (2020). [DOI: 10.1101/2020.04.10.20061267](https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.10.20061267)

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