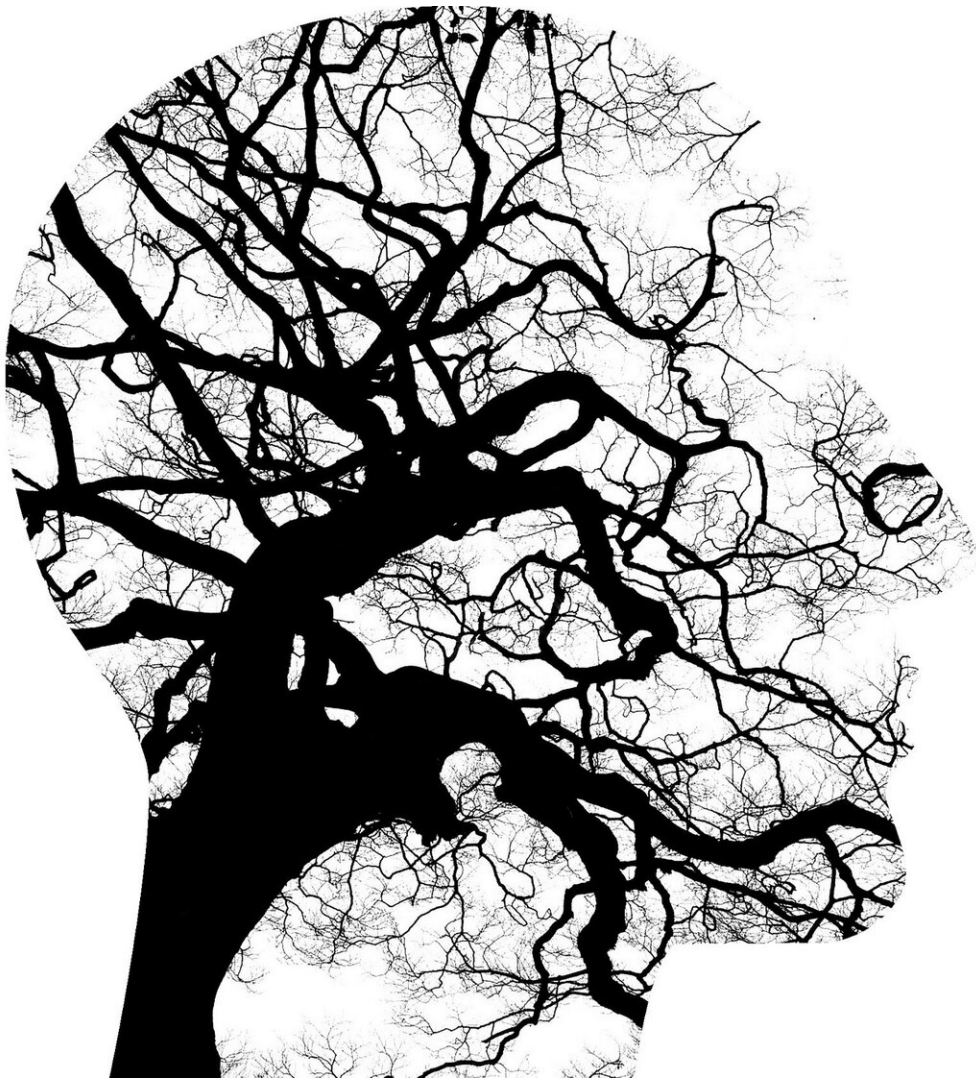


COVID-19 survey highlights growing suicide and mental health risks across various groups

June 26 2020, by Lou Corpuz-Bosshart



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COVID-19 has significantly increased the suicide risk for Canadians with preexisting mental health challenges and experiences of marginalization, reveals a new survey by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in partnership with researchers at the University of British Columbia.

While six percent of those surveyed said they experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings during the outbreak, this proportion rises to 18 percent of those with preexisting [mental health challenges](#), 16 percent of Indigenous people and 15 percent of those with a disability.

Other groups that experienced suicidal thoughts more frequently were people who identify as LGBTQ+ (14 percent) and parents living with children under 18 (nine percent).

"COVID-19 may have been termed the 'great equalizer,' but it certainly hasn't affected everyone equally—people who were already experiencing mental health challenges and experiences of marginalization appear to be the hardest hit," says lead researcher Emily Jenkins, a professor of nursing at UBC.

She added that the results align with surveys by the Public Health Agency of Canada and others that show threats to Canadians' mental health are growing in the wake of the pandemic, and it is among the first to show the disproportionate mental health impacts on various subgroups.

The survey was conducted among a nationally representative sample of 3,000 adults living in Canada. It ran from May 14-29, as the country started to reopen after lockdown and other COVID-19 measures.

Preexisting mental health conditions

The survey also highlighted the new pressures faced by people who already experience [mental health issues](#). These individuals are twice as likely as those without a mental health issue (59 percent compared to 33 percent) to say their mental health has declined amidst the pandemic.

They are also:

- 2.5 times more likely to feel depressed (46 percent vs 17 percent)
- three times more likely to have trouble coping (28 percent vs 11 percent)
- four times more likely to have had suicidal thoughts (18 percent vs four percent)
- four times more likely to have deliberately harmed themselves (four percent vs one percent)

Among this group, very few are accessing supports such as in-person counseling, virtual mental health care or online resources in general.

"People with preexisting mental health conditions are some of the hardest hit," says Margaret Eaton, national CEO, CMHA. "The pandemic is exposing how broken our mental health system already was in Canada. We must invest in community mental health programs and services, improve our nationwide suicide prevention plan and seize this opportunity to fix our system for the longer term."

Impact on families with young children

Public health messaging has largely talked about how children are less likely to get sick from the novel coronavirus—but the survey suggests they may be very vulnerable to the mental health effects, with 24 percent

of parents describing a deterioration in their children's mental health.

Parents living with children under 18 also reported:

- 53 percent feel anxious and worried (vs 44 percent of people without [young kids](#))
- 45 percent say their mental health has declined (vs 36 percent)
- 29 percent have increased their use of alcohol (vs 17 percent)
- 12 percent are worried about being safe from physical or domestic violence (vs eight percent)
- nine percent have had [suicidal thoughts](#) (vs six percent)

"The pandemic is a perfect storm of stress for parents and their kids, with many saying they are concerned about money, job loss and having enough food to feed their families," says study co-lead researcher Anne Gadermann, a professor in the School of Population and Public Health at UBC. "I'm particularly worried about those families who are experiencing multiple vulnerabilities, such as people facing discrimination or systemic racism, those with low incomes or a disability."

Signs of resilience

The researchers note that despite the stress, many are finding ways to protect their mental health. Exercise is the top strategy (59 percent), followed by connecting with family and friends (56 percent) and maintaining a healthy lifestyle (43 percent).

"It is promising to see some signs of positive coping; however, we can't lose sight of the fact that these individual measures are not adequate or accessible for many," observes Jenkins. "What we need to see now is a comprehensive mental health strategy, which must include policy-level investment to address the social conditions that shape these mental

[health](#) outcomes and to protect and promote [mental health](#) for all, including those most at risk."

The survey, conducted by Maru/Matchbox, is the first of three strategic waves of national surveying that is also aligned with work being conducted by the Mental Health Foundation in the U.K.

More information: Summary report of the findings: [news.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads ... i-report_Final.2.pdf](https://news.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/i-report_Final.2.pdf)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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