

Anxiety over COVID-19 is negatively impacting Canadian workers

October 15 2020



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There is no shortage of anxiety during this global pandemic and a new study by University of Toronto researchers suggests it could be taking its toll on workers.

The study, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, looked at the impact of pandemic-related [anxiety](#) on work, home, and [health outcomes](#). It surveyed 503 workers from a broad range of social, educational and employment backgrounds beginning from the first week of when social distancing orders were enacted in March.

That included those working from home and essential workers who had to physically go into work.

"It's clear from our study there is quite a bit of health anxiety relating to COVID-19," says study co-author John Trougakos, an associate professor in the department of management at U of T Scarborough and the Rotman School of Management.

Workers surveyed reported feeling anxiety about contracting or having COVID-19 and, as the researchers point out, one of the major consequences of health anxiety is emotion suppression. Past psychological research has shown that suppressing emotions reduces our ability to perform various tasks by impairing thought processes, problem-solving and memory. It can also impair our ability to connect socially with others and leave us with a decreased sense of control.

"When we bottle up our emotions, they don't go away on their own, and this has detrimental consequences for our interactions at home, our competence at work and our overall physical health," says Trougakos, who co-authored the study with Julie McCarthy, a professor in the department of management at U of T Scarborough and the Rotman School of Management, and Nitya Chawla from Texas A&M University.

Emotion suppression also has a [negative impact](#) on psychological need fulfillment, which is a type of motivational state. Simply put, it explains the extent to which certain needs are being met in different aspects of your life.

"This may include how effective you feel at your job, or how connected you feel to others," says Trougakos. "If those needs are being met, you are more likely to engage with your job and reach out to others. On the other hand, if those aren't being met, you are more likely to withdraw or be less effective in various aspects of your life."

A loss of a sense of control due to the unknown nature of the pandemic is having an effect on workers. The researchers also note that one of the key predictors of people's well-being is having a say or some control over their own fate. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, it's inevitable that people will feel a sense of helplessness.

"Establishing a sense of control in your life, even with respect to small things, can go far in facilitating resilience," says McCarthy.

"This is critical. If you're more worn out, that affects sleep quality, higher frequency of headaches, increased back and neck pain, slower recovery times—just a host of physical discomforts that can come along with it."

The study, however, identified a surprising but simple coping mechanism: handwashing.

McCarthy explains that washing one's hands is essentially a form of "problem-focused coping"—a way of doing something proactive to alter the source of the stress.

"It's such a simple thing, but handwashing can help mitigate the impact of the anxiety because you are being proactive and taking some control over the situation," McCarthy says.

As fears over a second wave rise and the pandemic shows no signs of subsiding any time soon, McCarthy says coping strategies may help us

mitigate some of the consequences of anxiety. In addition to handwashing, that includes activities like wearing a mask, using contact tracing apps or avoiding public gatherings, she says.

The researchers also emphasize the importance of more effective emotion regulation strategies, especially when it comes to suppressing emotions.

Experts in organizational behavior and HR management, the study's authors highlight the important role that everyone can play in mitigating anxiety, including partners, parents, organizations and work supervisors.

The researchers recommend training and seminars on topics such as resilience, stress management and work-life balance—anything that helps workers feel greater autonomy in their lives.

"This is an unprecedented crisis that is causing unprecedented levels of anxiety," says Trougakos. "It's important not to be in denial about the negative mental health impacts and instead offer strategies for people to take greater control of their lives."

More information: John P. Trougakos et al. Working in a pandemic: Exploring the impact of COVID-19 health anxiety on work, family, and health outcomes., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000739](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000739)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Anxiety over COVID-19 is negatively impacting Canadian workers (2020, October 15) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-anxiety-covid-negatively-impacting-canadian.html>

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