

What a distanced holiday season means for people with disabilities and chronic health conditions

December 22 2020, by David Pettinicchio and Michelle Maroto



Credit: Kelly from Pexels

For many, the holiday season is synonymous with family gatherings, often requiring arduous and stressful travel. This is so much a part of our culture that getting to a place to be with loved ones has been the plot of many holiday movies—from *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* to the

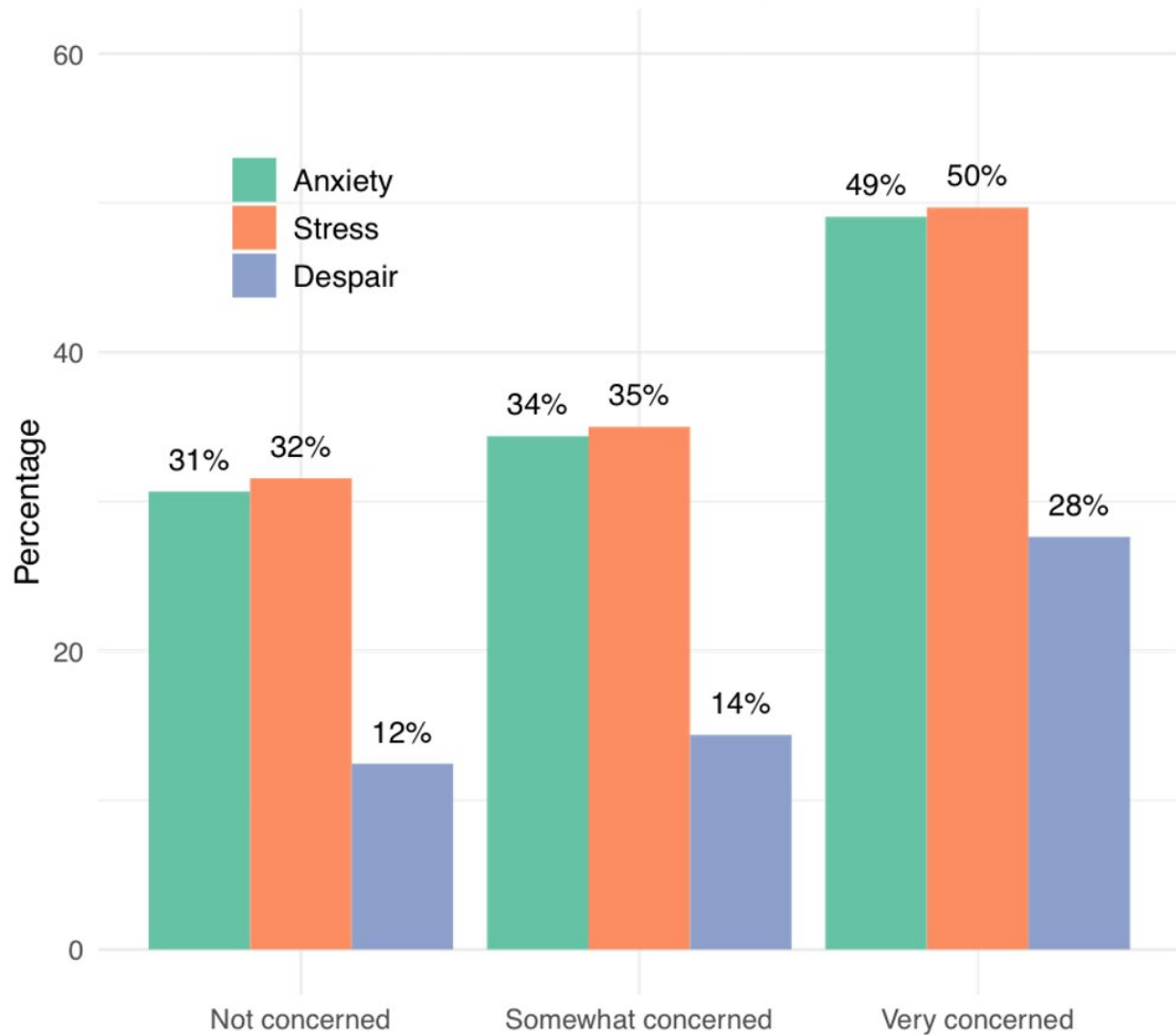
countless Hallmark Channel Christmas movies now available all year long.

In a time when many people are feeling lonely and isolated, celebrations with family and friends can feel like a lifeline. This is perhaps why many [Canadians](#) and [Americans](#) ignored recommended social distancing measures over their recent Thanksgiving holidays. In Canada, gatherings related to the October holiday resulted in a spike of COVID-19 cases. [The post-Thanksgiving COVID-19 spike](#) in the United States is now being felt in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Many of those who traveled and held [family gatherings](#) for these holidays may have done so because they saw themselves as being at low risk for COVID-19 complications. They put their need for contact above contracting and spreading the virus. Such gatherings were potentially important for limiting some of the negative [mental health](#) effects related to weathering this pandemic. Indeed, [half of all Canadians have reported worsening mental health](#) since the onset of social distancing measures.

Individuals in high-risk groups are already more likely to be experiencing negative mental [health](#) effects brought on by protective measures. What might this mean as the [holiday](#) season continues to unfold?

Increase in Anxiety, Stress, and Despair by Concern for Contracting COVID-19



2020 COVID-19 Response Survey of People with Disabilities and Health Conditions, N = 1,027 adults. Author provided

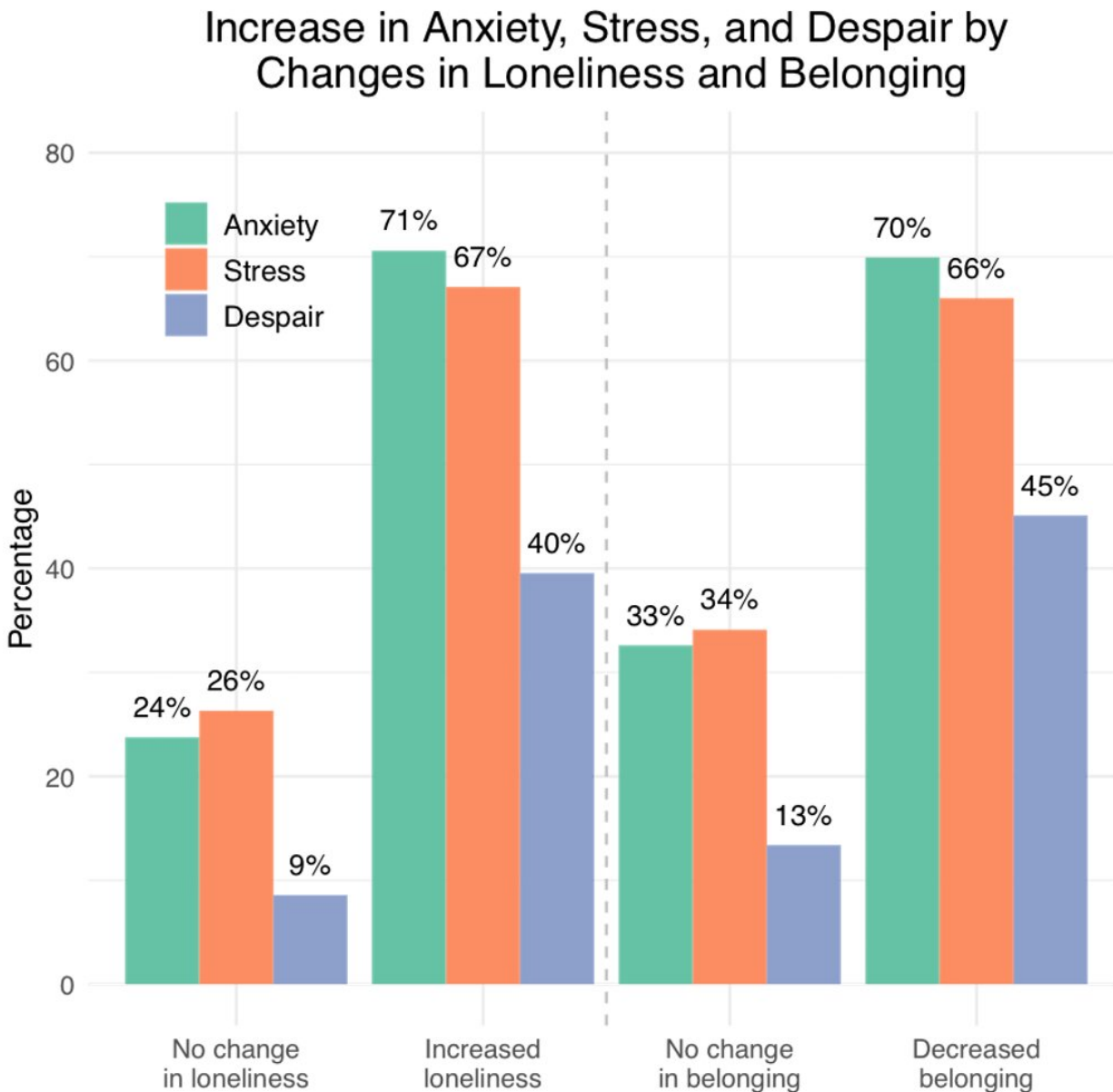
In our recent study, we surveyed and interviewed Canadians with disabilities and chronic [health conditions](#) to see how they're managing under COVID-19. We asked [respondents](#) a variety of questions about

their backgrounds, their specific disabilities and health conditions, their concerns about COVID-19, their financial and employment situations, and their mental health during COVID-19.

According to our survey conducted in June 2020—collected when case counts were actually declining and provinces were beginning to open up and end their shutdowns—78 percent of respondents reported being concerned about contracting COVID-19. Heightened concerns were also associated with poorer mental health outcomes, as shown in the graph above. Among respondents who reported being very concerned about contracting COVID-19, 49 percent reported increased anxiety, 50 percent reported more stress and 28 percent reported increases in despair.

Respondents told us that they have been feeling lonelier during the pandemic and many also felt like their levels of belonging have declined. Thirty percent reported increases in [feelings](#) of loneliness and 15 percent reported decreases in feelings of belonging. Increases in loneliness and decreases in belonging were also correlated with negative mental health outcomes including increased stress, anxiety and despair, which is highlighted in the graph below.

Our interview data, collected from August through October 2020, supports our survey findings. One respondent told us: "Can't go on dates, can't meet up for friends, feel pretty lonely, feel pretty depressed. It's pretty difficult. The only interaction I have is on Facebook and that gets me through the day for the most part, talking to people on Facebook. Other than that, not having a hug or any [human interaction](#) besides my parents, it's kind of sad. It's pretty depressing for the most part."



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Referring specifically to holidays, another respondent said: "The beginning of the pandemic, the first two or three months were OK.... I

don't see loved ones nearly as much. We would have got together as a family for Easter and Thanksgiving. And I'm sure Christmas is also canceled. So, I'm kind of feeling disenfranchised and not connected to anybody, anymore."

Everyone is affected in one way or another by the virus and the measures taken to combat it. Many people are feeling the emotional and psychological toll of weathering this pandemic. It has been a long and hard journey through the storm and, even though we can now see the light at the end of the tunnel, the journey is not over yet.

However, we aren't all feeling the effects of this journey equally. Many who already experience social barriers and poorer mental health status are especially vulnerable during a time when everywhere we look, we are reminded of a season associated with large gatherings of friends and family. Some we see often, others we only see during this time of year. Doing without these interactions over the [holiday season](#) will be hard for everyone. It's important to remember that for some people, it is going to be especially hard.

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