

Significant psychological toll from COVID lockdown for people with histories of mental illness

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New research suggests more priority needs to be given to support the health of New Zealanders struggling with mental illness during COVID-19 lockdowns—with findings showing many people with mental

health histories struggle and are disproportionately affected.

The University of Otago study measured the psychological distress, anxiety, wellbeing and suicidality of around 600 Kiwis who'd been diagnosed with [mental illness](#) prior to last year's COVID-19 lockdown, comparing their experiences during lockdown to those with no prior diagnosed [mental health](#) illness.

Overall, 32 percent (197) of those pre-diagnosed with a [mental disorder](#) reported their mental [health](#) had deteriorated noticeably during lockdown, while 50 percent (316) said it had remained stable and 20 percent that it had improved.

Of concern, patients with an existing mental health diagnosis were at around twice the risk of reporting moderate to high [psychological distress](#), anxiety and poor well-being during lockdown compared with those without a mental disorder. They were at three to four times the risk of having experienced suicidal thoughts and plans, respectively.

The group also reported poorer relationships with people and whānau in their 'bubble' and said they were more likely to feel lonely or isolated due to reduced social contacts (41 percent compared to 26 percent). They were also more likely to be concerned about their own health (25 percent compared to 15 percent) and the health of others (40 percent versus 32 percent) and more likely to be worried about their finances (54 percent versus 47 percent).

Lead author Associate Professor Caroline Bell, of the University of Otago Christchurch's Department of Psychological Medicine, says the results clearly show that the health of New Zealanders with mental illness needs to be prioritized further during lockdowns.

"This study is the first we are aware of to examine the psychosocial

outcomes of lockdown in New Zealand on those with a previous diagnosis of mental illness. The findings make it clear this more vulnerable group need more specifically-targeted support to address their needs. We now need to establish what further measures are required with the potential of further lockdowns to come, and what enhanced support structures we need to put in place.

Our findings emphasize too the importance of maintaining high levels of not just counseling and clinical support for these patients but social connections as well. Lockdown is a particular challenge for many with mental illness living in the community with the requirement they isolate at home. For many this means cutting off or limiting their social connections at a time when they're sorely needed to maintain their taha hinengaro or mental health and wellbeing."

Co-author, Associate Professor Susanna Every-Palmer from the University of Otago, Wellington, says the findings also highlight the importance of vaccination for this group of New Zealanders.

"People with serious mental illnesses have been found to be twice as likely to need hospitalization if they contract COVID-19 and almost three times as likely to die as a result of infection compared to those with other health conditions. These risks were recognized in the Ministry of Health's vaccination roll-out plan, when people with mental health and substance abuse issues were prioritized in Group 3 for early vaccination.

However, many New Zealanders with experience of mental health and addiction issues did not realize they were in a priority group. Furthermore, a variety of medical and socio-economic factors may have made it harder for them to get vaccinated. Data from early September shows the full vaccination rate for people using specialist mental health and addiction services was only 19 percent, lagging well behind other New Zealanders. It's important that people with mental illness are

supported in accessing vaccines and that those providing their care can also ensure they fully understand the benefits and risks of vaccination."

Published in *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, this study is a follow-on from research conducted last year by the University of Otago surveying 2.495 of the general public nationwide during the first lockdown. The focus of this latest study was to dig deeper to examine the effects of [lockdown](#) on this sub-set pre-diagnosed with mental [illness](#).

The survey has just been repeated to examine the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on New Zealanders' mental health.

More information: Caroline Bell et al, Psychological distress, loneliness, alcohol use and suicidality in New Zealanders with mental illness during a strict COVID-19 lockdown, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00048674211034317](https://doi.org/10.1177/00048674211034317)

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