

Study analyzes calls to helplines in 19 countries during pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic is causing a wide range of mental health issues worldwide. However, it is still difficult to quantify which general trends exist in populations and which are also transnational. In order to

shed more light on such trends, a research team consisting of Valentin Klotzbücher from the Department of Economics and Dr. Stephanie Reich from Faculty of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Freiburg, along with Marius Brülhart and Rafael Lalive from the University of Lausanne, has now analyzed 8 million calls to helplines in 19 countries.

Among other things, they found that at times 35 percent more calls were received than in pre-pandemic times and that the peak was reached six weeks after the start of the pandemic. The reasons for these calls were mostly fear, loneliness and later concerns about physical health. At the same time, the researchers found that the otherwise predominant causes, such as relationship or [economic issues](#), or topics such as violence or suicide, did not occur more frequently, but were superseded by acute pandemic concerns. Calls related to [suicidal thoughts](#) meanwhile, increased when restrictive policies were strengthened, and they decreased when financial support services were expanded. The researchers recently published their study results in the journal *Nature*.

"Psychological aspects are often left out of political decision-making processes"

"Surveying the general mental state of a population or even cross-national trends is very difficult," says Valentin Klotzbücher. "It is one of the reasons why mental aspects are often left out of political decision-making processes—with potentially serious consequences. With our study, we wanted to make a contribution to counteracting this trend." The researchers examined data from 23 helplines in 14 European countries, the U.S., China, Hong Kong, Israel and Lebanon.

Prior to the pandemic, the predominant reasons for calls to helplines were [relationship problems](#) (37 percent), loneliness (20 percent), and

various anxieties (13 percent). "During the pandemic, calls about anxiety increased by 2.4 percentage points and loneliness by 1.5 percentage points, while calls about relationship problems decreased by 2.5 percentage points," Stephanie Reich explains. Other frequently occurring topics also decreased, such as economic situation (-0.6 percentage points), addiction (-0.3 percentage points) or violence (-0.3 percentage points). However, among female callers under age 30, calls about violence increased by 0.9 percent.

An analysis of calls around the topic of suicide across U.S. states, as well as in Germany and France, shows that higher call volumes tended to be registered when more stringent pandemic response policies were implemented, while more generous government support for individuals was associated with lower call volumes.

More information: Marius Brühlhart et al, Mental health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic as revealed by helpline calls, *Nature* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-021-04099-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-04099-6)

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