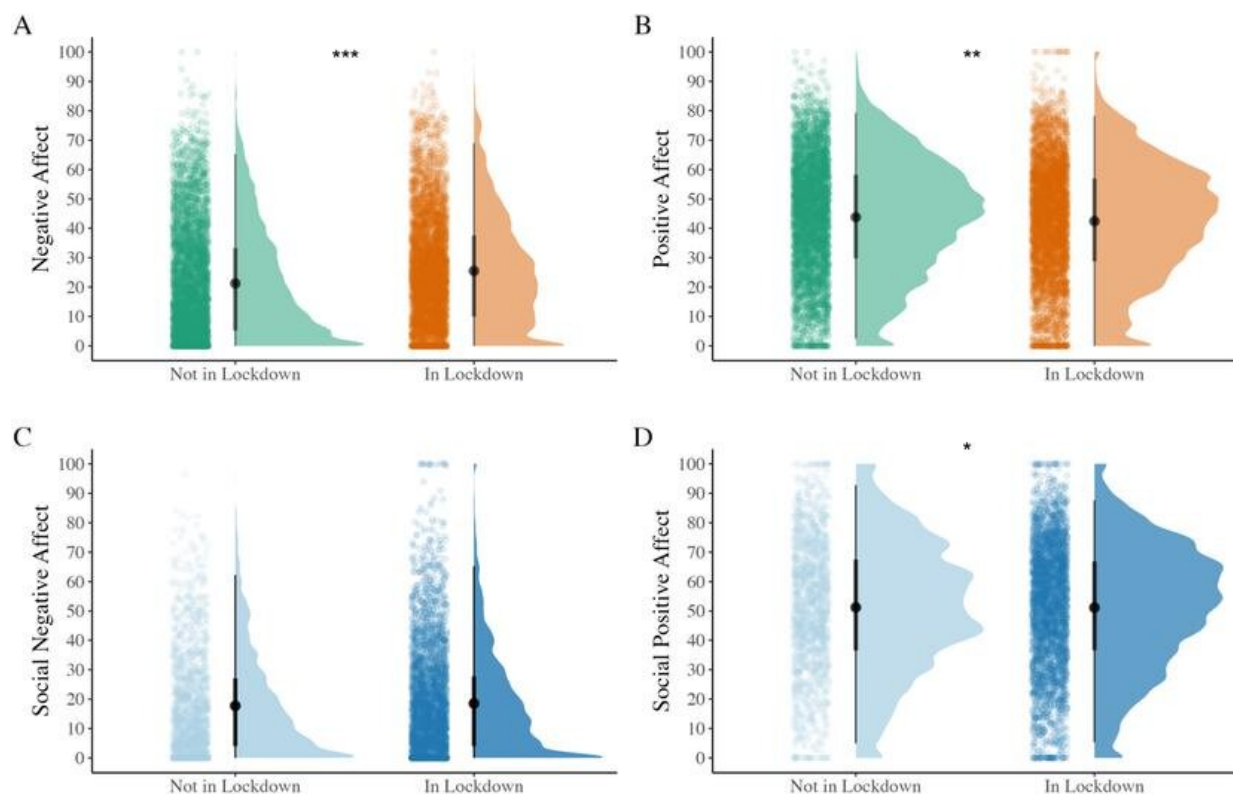


Research finds many people in Melbourne coped relatively well emotionally during COVID-19 lockdowns

April 5 2023, by Ella Moeck et al



The Association Between Lockdown Status and Mean Levels of Negative and Positive Affects in Dataset 1 (Panels A and B) and Dataset 2 (Panels C and D). In each panel, the scatterplots on the left show the raw data and the density plots on the right show the distribution of the data. The black dot is the mean level of the outcome variable with the 95% CI shown by the error bars. Credit: *Emotion* (2023). DOI: 10.1037/emo0001226

For a while, lockdown was all anyone could talk about. Now that the dust has settled and our sourdough starters have matured, what have scientists learned about the emotional toll of lockdowns?

Like most Melburnians, our team entered 2021 thinking we were done with lockdowns. We resumed our research on people's emotions, sending out short smartphone surveys asking how people feel several times a day.

But not long after we started collecting data, the Victorian Government announced a fourth [lockdown](#).

Like many, the thought of another lockdown was exhausting but our team quickly realized that the return of lockdowns presented us with a unique opportunity: we could research the [emotional consequences](#) of extended and repeated COVID-19 restrictions. We ultimately published our findings in the journal *Emotion*.

By the end of 2021, we had more than 14,000 responses from more than 400 people about how they were feeling and what they were doing to manage those feelings, both in and out of lockdown.

We predicted that people would feel worse on days in lockdown than on days out of lockdown. We made this prediction because the lockdown restricted people's opportunities to interact with others and the diversity of their day-to-day experiences.

So what did we find?

Lockdowns made people feel worse, but only slightly

Before jumping into our findings it's important to note that our [sample group](#) had a high level of "pandemic privilege." Most of our participants continued working or studying and few had children or caregiving

responsibilities.

In this group, we found that lockdowns did take an emotional toll, but that toll was relatively mild. On days in lockdown, participants' levels of [negative emotions](#) were, on average, 4% higher than on days out of lockdown.

These feelings included tiredness, dullness, anxiety and irritation.

People also reported feeling slightly lower levels of excitement and enthusiasm in lockdown, with approximately a 2.5% reduction in these positive feelings. But surprisingly, people felt similarly calm and relaxed on days they were in lockdown compared to days they were out of lockdown.

We also found that people had difficulty maintaining positive feelings when in lockdown. Instead, when people had an experience that made them feel more positive—like going on a walk with a friend—they'd quickly return to a mildly negative emotional state.

Overall, in the second year of the pandemic, lockdown left people feeling slightly depressed but not overly anxious. This pattern could be to do with when we ran our studies. In 2021, the initial shock about COVID-19 and related restrictions may have subsided, leaving behind a moderately melancholic residue.

Finding ways to make ourselves feel better

We also investigated how people tried to make themselves feel better when in lockdown. We found that on days in lockdown, people distracted themselves more than on days out of lockdown.

Think of the various activities you did during lockdown. Did you make

bread or have a Netflix watch party? Did you take up knitting or do Zoom yoga? Our research suggests people did not just do these activities to stay busy but also to stay happy.

Should we have lockdowns?

One of the main arguments against lockdowns was that the restrictions worsened people's well-being. But until now we haven't had the data to back this argument. Our research suggests that lockdowns do make people feel worse, but not that much worse than usual.

So why didn't lockdown take a bigger emotional toll?

One reason could be that by 2021, people were used to the challenges of lockdown. Almost all our participants lived in Melbourne and, when we surveyed them, had already experienced several lockdowns. By then people may have learned how to keep themselves feeling mentally well, despite being largely bound at home.

Another possible explanation is that it wasn't lockdowns that made people feel worse—the pandemic alone may have done that.

We collected data over four months during the second year of the pandemic. This method sets our research apart from previous studies on the psychological consequences of lockdowns, many of which used pre-pandemic levels of emotions as a comparison—a bit like comparing rotten apples to freshly picked oranges.

But it's well established that the pandemic has taken a toll on people's mental health. By mid-2021, perhaps the emotional cost of lockdown per se was not much more than the emotional cost of the pandemic as a whole.

Lockdowns aren't equal for all

Our research had a relatively large sample size, but due to the pandemic privilege we mentioned earlier, it may underestimate the emotional toll of lockdown for some people.

Other [research](#) has shown that caregivers had a particularly tough time during lockdowns, with an increased risk of burnout.

If we had surveyed a more representative or vulnerable sample like people experiencing job loss due to COVID or struggling to keep a [small business](#) afloat, we may have found that lockdown was more emotionally costly.

Policymakers were in an unenviable position during the first couple of years of the pandemic. They had to make tough decisions, balancing the economy with the public's mental and physical health.

Our data show that repeated lockdowns did take a toll on people's emotions, but this impact was quite mild among the people we sampled.

Should we face another [pandemic](#) or need to isolate people for another reason like a climate crisis, lockdowns remain a viable option to keep people safe and—by and large—well.

More information: Ella K. Moeck et al, Everyday emotional functioning in COVID-19 lockdowns., *Emotion* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0001226](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001226)

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