

Psychologists study how Americans are coping with impacts of COVID-19

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New research from The University of Toledo Department of Psychology aimed at establishing a baseline of how COVID-19 and social distancing measures to curb the spread of the disease are affecting Americans' mental health uncovered something unexpected—individuals' loneliness appears to be lessened the more they personally feel affected by the pandemic.

Unsurprisingly, the study found that being under a stay-at-home order was broadly associated with increased [health anxiety](#), financial worry and loneliness.

Even so, people who said that their lives had been significantly uprooted by COVID-19 consistently reported feeling less lonely relative to those who saw the pandemic's disruption on their daily lives as more minor.

"COVID-19 can impact people in a number of ways. Parents may have had to take on new responsibilities at home, regular schedules and habits may be disrupted, or a person may be concerned about a loved one who is vulnerable for

COVID-19," said Dr. Matthew Tull, a UToledo psychology professor and lead author on the study. "It looks like it's possible that those who feel COVID-19 has had a greater impact on their daily lives might be trying to connect more with people and access social support. This could have some positive [mental health](#) aspects down the road."

The findings, Tull said, are consistent with suggestions that the shared experience of COVID-19 could increase closeness and social cohesion, similar to what has been seen following other mass tragedies.

The study was published in the journal *Psychiatry Research*.

That people are anxious about their health, worried about their finances, and feeling isolated from their communities in the face of a pandemic is natural and understandable. Researchers say anxiety can be a motivating factor that leads to helpful behaviors, such as taking seriously the recommendations of public health officials and being cautious in your own decisions and assessments of risk.

However, when people struggle to cope with that anxiety, it can lead to problematic behaviors—[substance abuse](#), seeking [medical care](#) that isn't needed for reassurance, or, alternatively, putting off an emergency room visit that could be life-saving over worries of contracting COVID-19.

Researchers surveyed 500 people between March 27 and April 5—roughly the peak of stay-at-home orders that asked more than 300 million Americans to significantly limit interactions outside their own household. The age of those surveyed ranged from 20 to 74, with a mean age of 40. About 52% were male. Income was broken down into three brackets, with roughly one-third reporting annual household income of less than \$35,000, one-third reporting earning between \$35,000 and \$64,999, and

another third reporting household income of at least \$65,000. Respondents represented 45 states.

The findings were generally uniform across the board, although people in lower income brackets reported more anxiety, financial worry and loneliness.

By getting a baseline of how Americans were being affected during the high point of stay-at-home orders, psychologists can better understand the long-term mental health impacts of the crisis.

"This is just an initial snapshot of where people are. It's really setting the stage for the next stage of the study, which will look at how people are coping over time," Tull said. "I think that's going to be particularly fruitful and give us ideas in terms of what kind of interventions should be offered or needs should be addressed in the community. Our hope is this work might help us identify over time individuals who are particularly in need of services and how we can best connect with them."

More information: Matthew T. Tull et al. Psychological Outcomes Associated with Stay-at-Home Orders and the Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life, *Psychiatry Research* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113098](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113098)

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