

For immediate release

Despair and suicidal feelings deepen as pandemic wears on

New national survey finds Canadians' mental health eroding

Toronto, ON and Vancouver, BC (December 3, 2020) – The second wave of the pandemic has intensified feelings of stress and anxiety, causing alarming levels of despair, suicidal thoughts and hopelessness in the Canadian population. This, according to the newest wave of data collected through a nationwide monitoring survey on the mental health impacts of COVID-19, released today by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in partnership with UBC researchers.

Most people in Canada (71%) indicate they're worried about the second wave of the virus, with 58% worried about a loved one or family member dying, and only 21% feeling hopeful. As winter approaches, 40% of Canadians say their mental health has deteriorated since March, with the decline more pronounced in those who are unemployed (61%), those with a pre-existing mental health issue (61%), younger people aged 18-24 (60%), Indigenous peoples (54%), those identify as LGBTQ2+ (54%) and those with a disability (50%). Almost half of women (45%) and a third of men (34%) say their mental health has declined.

“Cold weather, uncertainty, eroded social networks and restrictions on holiday gatherings are hitting at a time when people are already anxious, hopeless and fearful that things are going to get worse,” says CMHA's National CEO, Margaret Eaton. “I am afraid that many people are in such despair that they can't see past it.”

Of great concern is the sharp increase in suicidality this fall, with 1 in 10 Canadians (10%) experiencing recent thoughts or feelings of suicide, up from six per cent in the spring and 2.5 per cent throughout pre-pandemic 2016. Suicidal thoughts and feelings are even higher in various subgroups of the population, including those who identify as LGBTQ2+ (28%), with existing mental illness or mental health issues (27%), with a disability (24%), aged 25-34 (21%) and 18-24 (19%) and who are Indigenous (20%).

“We are seeing a direct relationship between social stressors and declining mental health,” says lead researcher Emily Jenkins, a professor of nursing at UBC who studies mental health and substance use. “As the pandemic wears on and cases and related restrictions rise, a good proportion of our population is suffering. Particularly concerning are the levels of suicidal thinking and self-harm, which have increased exponentially since before the pandemic and are further magnified in certain sub-groups of the population who were already experiencing stigma, exclusion, racism and discrimination.”

A third of Canadians (39%) are worried about finances, with half of parents with children under 18 (48%) and those with a household income of less than \$25,000 (51%) reporting financial concerns due to COVID-19. Especially as potential school closures loom, parents are under pressure with 13 per cent experiencing suicidal thoughts or feelings, one quarter (27%) worried about putting food on the table and one fifth (18%) concerned about being safe from physical or emotional domestic violence.

Unfortunately, few Canadians are getting mental health services and supports they need, while many are relying on a combination of healthy and unhealthy strategies to cope.

“It’s encouraging that half of Canadians are exercising outdoors as a way to cope with the pandemic, but only 11 per cent are accessing virtual mental health services or supports. More are turning to alcohol or substances to get through,” says Anne Gadermann, co-lead researcher and professor at the School of Population and Public Health, UBC.

Nearly 1 in 5 (17%) have indicated that they have increased their use of substances as a way to cope. A fifth of people (20%) in Canada have increased alcohol use, while many have also increased their use of other substances, including cannabis (9%) and prescription medication (7%), with even higher rates in subgroups.

The pandemic keeps underlining that mental health is not an individual responsibility, and that policy-level interventions are required. Even before the pandemic, the mental health care system in Canada was not meeting people’s needs due to long waitlists, access issues, inequity and underfunding.

“Lengthy wait times are a problem, in part, because there has been a chronic underfunding of community-based mental health services and a reliance on intensive, high-cost services like hospitals and acute care. If we fund community-level interventions, this will alleviate pressure on an acute-care system already hit hard by COVID-19—and get people the help they need sooner,” says Eaton.

The survey was dispatched by Maru/Matchbox from September 14-21, 2020 to a representative sample of 3,027 people ages 18 and up living in Canada.

It is the second of three strategic waves of national surveying that is also aligned with work being conducted by the Mental Health Foundation in the U.K.

To access a complete summary of the findings, please click [here](#).

To get help:

- Find your local CMHA cmha.ca/find-your-cmha
- Get free mental health help at cmha.ca/bounceback or <https://ca.portal.gs/>
- Reach Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Thinking of suicide? Call 1-833-456-4566 (in QC: 1-866-277-3553) or visit www.crisisservicescanada.ca.
- In an emergency, please call 9-1-1 or visit your nearest emergency department.



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