

The impact of COVID-19 on **mental health** in our community

Everyone experiences different levels of mental health wellness throughout their life, including times when we feel well and times when we may struggle.^{3.0}

COVID-19 affects every single one of us

The COVID-19 pandemic has wide-reaching effects on all aspects of our work, family, and social lives. We all experience and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in our own way. This Vital Focus series examines the impacts of measures to control COVID-19 on health and wellbeing in our community.

What is mental health?

Mental health is “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”^{3.1}



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How could COVID-19 impact mental health?

- Increase in loneliness, isolation, and boredom due to physical distancing from family and friends^{3.4, 3.5, 3.6}
- Increase in feelings of stress, anxiety and depression^{3.2, 3.6, 3.8, 3.9, 3.10, 3.11, 3.12}
- Doctors, nurses, and other health care workers may experience increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, loss of sleep, stress and risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and substance use disorder^{3.11, 3.12, 3.13}
- Increase in suicidal thoughts and risk of suicide^{3.14, 3.15, 3.16}
 - Suicide is a complex behaviour that involves multiple factors that interact with each other and are influenced by the environment in which a person lives.
 - Increased unemployment during this time could be a contributing factor leading to increased risk of suicide.*

If you are thinking of suicide, know there are effective treatments and support available.

What does mental health look like in Canada?

A national survey from April 24 to May 11, 2020, asked Canadians questions about their mental health since the start of physical distancing, with specific questions that asked them to reflect on the previous two weeks.^{3,2}

■ 52% of Canadians indicated that their mental health had gotten worse.

- 88% of survey participants experienced at least one symptom of anxiety in the two weeks before completing the survey.^{3,2}

■ Nervous, anxious, or on edge feelings were the most frequently reported anxiety-related symptoms (71%), followed by annoyance or irritability (69%) and difficulty relaxing (64%).

■ Youth were more likely to note the negative effects of physical distancing on mental health compared to seniors^{3,2}

- 64% of Canadians aged 15-24 indicated a negative effect on their mental health when compared to 35% of Canadians 65 years and older.

■ 66% of Canadians reported experiencing low levels of stress (defined as not very stressful or a bit stressful) and 28% of Canadians experienced high stress (defined as quite a bit or extremely stressful).

- Among Canadians who indicated negative effects on their mental health since physical distancing began, 41% reported high stress levels.



Physical distancing can cause stress and have negative effects on the mental health of Canadians.



Throughout COVID-19, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Guelph offers programming options like virtual one-on-one and group mentoring.

What does mental health look like locally?

Here 24/7 is the coordinated intake, assessment, referral, crisis, waitlist and appointment booking system for mental health and addiction services in Guelph and Wellington County. From March 1 to June 30, 2020 the number of calls made to Here 24/7 ranged from 4,426 to 5,642 calls per month.

Call volumes from March to May 2020 were consistent with the number of calls received before the COVID-19 pandemic started. There was a 25.7% increase in calls in June when compared to the previous months. This June increase was not seen in previous years.^{3,17}

From April 1 to June 30, 2020, the main reason for connecting with Here 24/7 was tracked for 1,956 contacts. Among those 1,956 contacts, the **top 5 reasons^{3,17} for connecting with Here 24/7** were:



In Guelph General Hospital and Headwaters Health Centre, there were 1,266 emergency department visits due to mental health concerns from March 15 to August, 2020, compared to 1,666 in 2019 and 1,588 in 2018 over the same time frame.^{3,18}

From March to mid-June visits were roughly 30% lower than the average number of visits for the same time period in 2018 and 2019. The reduction in hospital visits compared to previous years may be attributed to fear of contracting COVID-19.

From mid-June to August, 2020 the number of emergency department visits for mental health was similar to the 2018/2019 average.

Recommendations

In Guelph and Wellington, organizations are already working to implement some of the following recommendations:

- **Continue to make available easy-to-understand information** about COVID-19, resilience, coping and local services to support positive mental health and increase mental health literacy, especially among vulnerable groups.
 - **Consider barriers to accessing information** such as lack of internet or technology, low levels of literacy, language barriers or disabilities.
- **Continue to educate community members to help identify people at risk of suicide** and link them to community support organizations.
- **Provide adequate funding for mental health services** to respond to increased community need related to COVID-19 and to address potential interruptions in care.
- **Collect timely and reliable local data** to understand and respond to trends in mental health and access to mental health services.
- **Create opportunities for people to connect** with others in ways that align with pandemic precautions and regulations.
- **Leverage changes that have been made to mental health service delivery** during COVID-19 (e.g., virtual care) that could lead to better care experiences and/or outcomes for some community members.



**If you are in crisis,
call Here 24/7 at
1-844-437-3247**

You are not alone.

Supports and services are ready to help you.

If you are struggling with your mental health or if you know someone who is struggling, there are mental health supports available to you.

- **Contact your primary care provider.**
- **Visit [Here4Help.ca](https://www.here4help.ca)** to access online resources and support during COVID-19.
- **Visit [Here4Hope.ca/framework](https://www.here4hope.ca/framework)** for education and awareness resources about suicide
- **Call Family Counselling and Support Services for Guelph-Wellington:**
 - **Distress line at 1-888-821-3760 or 519-821-3760**
 - **Walk-In/Virtual Mental Health clinics at 519-824-2431 or 1-800-307-7078** to make an appointment. No referral required
- **Visit [Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health](https://www.wellington-dufferin-guelph.ca)** for additional mental health resources

Footnotes and references are available at [Toward Common Ground](https://www.towardcommonground.ca).

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Note: There are limitations associated with the data and research sources included in this Vital Focus. For more information about sources and citations, please go to [Toward Common Ground](https://www.towardcommonground.ca). If you know of research or data about diverse communities not represented in this Vital Focus, please contact us at sarahh@towardcommonground.ca