

Lockdown 'survival mode' leaves parents of young children struggling with mental health ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The long days of Alert Level 5 in eastern Newfoundland are testing the limits of some parents of young children, as one mom calls her current situation similar to "survival mode," as she struggles to balance family, career, and mental health.

Her house is a noisy one, with three children under the age of five, all out of daycare and at home. Her husband wakes early to get in some hours working from home as she handles child care, before they trade off and she settles into her corner of the house-turned-office.

"I'm not gonna lie. Our first week in lockdown was a bit of a mess. There were some tears from everyone," said Chelsea, a pseudonym. CBC is not naming her to protect her identity as she speaks to mental health.

Chelsea and her husband had already been working from home prior to the latest lockdown came into effect on Feb. 13.

But the news of the contagious virus variant circulating in the metro area changed everything for them, regardless of alert levels: as an asthmatic, Chelsea is high-risk, and the couple have decided to keep their children home until she's vaccinated. Five daycares have had cases of COVID-19 during the current outbreak, according to Eastern Health.

Now her days are a flurry of activity, much of it mental: Chelsea worries about how her small children are coping and their needs, her own career, as well as the stress and anxiety of the virus.

"No one really has their alone time," she said. She's been trying to carve out space, in whatever small ways she can: a shower by herself, a cup of coffee while TV entertains the kids for a few minutes. But those recharging moments are small, and scattered, and as the lockdown days crept on Chelsea found herself overwhelmed.

She decided to be up front and called her employer about it.

"Listen: something's got to give. You know, I don't want to lose my job, I don't want to be laid off, but the No. 1 job I have is a parent. That's a job I'm not allowed to fail at," she recalled telling her manager.

Chelsea is lucky; her employer is understanding and has mental health supports, and she said her conversations about work-life balance were well-received. But she loves her job, and still wants to perform, even as her ability to do so has been whittled away.

"There's challenges to being seen working from home as they are, let alone when you're in the middle of a team meeting and you have to run away because your three-year-old is going to jump off the couch and break their leg," she said.

"Your focus is not there — the one that you normally would use to shine, when you're looking for career advancement, is not really there."

Parents on a 'sinking ship'

That stress rings true to Tina, who owns a few child-care operations in the St. John's area. [Like Chelsea, CBC is shielding her identity.]

She gets messages and calls daily from moms and dads, "just telling us, they're struggling. They can't manage this. And that because there's no double bubble, they can't even rely on family, grandparents, to assist with child care right now," she said.

"And they're really struggling. They're on a sinking ship right now."

Tina's centres have been open during lockdown, but not to everyone: for the first two weeks, she could only take children of essential workers who worked outside the home. Then, the rules opened up slightly to allow 50 per cent capacity, to existing clients only.

Among all the changes, Tina worries about the children still unable to attend. She and her staff work with many young children in vulnerable situations, she said, from transient kids bouncing between foster homes, to those with parents facing huge problems themselves that have been multiplied by the pandemic.

"Stress is higher in homes, and there are a lot of families who are struggling with addiction, mental health and abuse in households," Tina

said.

"So the daycare centres are an outlet, and a safe place. And it's also a break for those parents who are struggling, who might not be equipped or have the support system that they need to be able to take care of a child full-time."

"We think that if we look for help, we are not good enough. And that's not true." - Martha Traverso-Yepez

Her centres give a routine and structure for such vulnerable children, giving them the sight of the same friends, early childhood educators, play spaces and meals. When the last lockdown lifted, Tina said she and her staff saw many children — from all walks of life — experience a rough return to daycare.

"We see more hitting, more punching, more lashing out with younger children. And also too, we see more tears. We see them having a harder time for drop off and pick up in the evening," Tina said.

With that experience raw in her mind, Tina said she had hoped in the months following the province would talk to child-care providers and parents about what to do better in case another lockdown hit.

"I think the problem is that none of those conversations actually happened," she said.

A nationwide problem

Stories of other parents in crisis have come up across the country, and troubling statistics around the mental health of parents of young children have been trickling in since the start of the pandemic.

A team of researchers from the University of British Columbia and the Canadian Mental Health Association have been collecting waves of data, starting in May of 2020, for insights into what is happening in families' homes across the country during the pandemic.

Their initial work in the spring found Canadian parents with children younger than 18 reported worse mental health in May compared to prior to the pandemic, compared to people without children living at home. Within that data, 55 per cent of parents with children younger than four years old said their mental health had deteriorated compared to 40 per cent of other parents: the top emotions parents cited were anxiety and worry.

That study, published in January, showed Canadians reactions following a similar pattern as mental health studies have shown in the United States and overseas.

"Given the multiple stressors facing families, we were not surprised to see parents reporting worsened mental health and increased negative interactions with their children (harsh words, conflict)," the study's researchers, Anne Gadermann and Kimberly Thomson, told CBC News in an email.

Since the May survey, researchers have conducted two more rounds of work in September and January and found those stresses haven't decreased among parents as time wears on, and some new burdens have arisen, with Gadermann and Thomson citing that parents' worries about their children's well-being has only increased.

The importance of child care — and therapy

There is a troubling lack of resources for families with young children even in non-pandemic times, said one Memorial University researcher, and the lockdown has highlighted that vulnerability.

"I am very much concerned about the consequences of isolation," said Martha Traverso-Yepez, a health researcher and recently retired professor with MUN's Faculty of Medicine.

"In response to that, we need to remind families that there must be supports, because we need the village, really, to support young families with children."

We think that if we look for help, we are not good enough. And that's not true.- Martha Traverso-Yepez

Traverso-Yepez wants to see much wider societal change, and there has been some movement, with the federal promise in September to create a universal child-care system in response to the pandemic's continued disproportionate impact upon women in the workforce.

But that's a long-term goal, and particularly remote during lockdown. With in-person help remaining elusive for the most part under Alert Level 5, there are some things parents can do, Traverso-Yepez said, pointing to the province's Family Resource Centres as valuable tools that offer a variety of supports.

It's also time to shed any expectations that parents can handle such extraordinary and taxing circumstances on their own, Traverso-Yepez said.

"We think that if we look for help, we are not good enough. And that's not true."

Getting help also helps inner resilience, she said, helping fortify parents and give them tools within themselves to better cope with stress.

Chelsea supports that idea. She has recently begun therapy and said it's made a huge difference as she gets through her day-to-day.

"I cannot say enough good things about therapy, and anyone who thinks they should be ashamed because they have a therapist doesn't know what they're talking about, because it's wonderful," she said.

Therapy has helped her understand that while she may feel at times like she's failing, she isn't — and that what is before her, and many other parents, is an impossible task.

To get through, she said, she's learned to set boundaries with her work and her relationship, and is finding ways to take care of herself so she can take care of others, until the vaccine.

"You can't pour from an empty cup. Well, right now, the cup is running dry really quickly."

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