

Pandemic's toll on mental health of mothers exceeds fears of researchers, Lancet study finds ^[1]

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Source: The Globe and mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Mar 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online (login needed) ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Danielle Kimmel said she was taking on more than she could handle even before the pandemic. But by last fall, Ms. Kimmel, who works as a banker, owns her own tanning salon business and is a mother of two young children, hit a wall.

The stress of dealing with panicked banking clients all day, while trying to support her own employees, combined with her guilt about not being as patient and attentive to her children as she wished, overwhelmed her. She found herself crying on her drive home every night, and would sit in the driveway for an extra 10 minutes to pull herself together before facing her partner and children, ages 2 and 7.

"They're excited to see Mommy, and all I want to do is hide in the back of my closet and never come out again," said Ms. Kimmel of Woodstock, Ont.

As new research suggests, many Canadian women have been similarly struggling in the past year. In a study, published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* on Wednesday, a research team led by the University of Calgary found mental-health problems among mothers, between the ages of 25 and 44, surged during the pandemic, with rates of anxiety and depression nearly double what they were pre-COVID-19.

The study, which compared the mental-health survey results of more than 1,300 Canadian mothers between May and June last year against their results from previous years, found 35 per cent of them reported elevated symptoms of depression, and 31 per cent reported elevated symptoms of anxiety during the pandemic. That was up from 19 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively, before the pandemic.

"We anticipated that we would see increases in rates of anxiety and depression in mothers during the pandemic; I think I was surprised to what extent," said lead author Nicole Racine, a registered psychologist and postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Calgary.

While the researchers have yet to determine whether the prevalence of mental-health problems has changed since last spring, they predict a coming wave of mental-health issues, which will likely persist even when the threat of coronavirus infections eventually subsides.

"We have been in a pretty constant state of alert over the last year, and this can create a wear and tear on the body and the mind. It's hard to remain mentally healthy in the face of that," said senior author Sheri Madigan, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Calgary.

Dr. Madigan noted the pandemic has also fundamentally shifted people's views of the world, and of their safety and security. "Our fear of the unknown and concern about not being in control, or things not being predictable, will be hard for people to ignore in a postpandemic future," she said.

While other surveys have shown a high prevalence of mental-health issues among Canadians during the pandemic, this study, which relied on participants of a continuing longitudinal study called *All Our Families*, allowed researchers to examine how women were faring, compared with their own depression and anxiety scores collected previously, when they were three years, five years, and eight years postpartum.

The study found First Nations, Inuit and Métis mothers had higher average depression scores during the pandemic than all other mothers. It also found greater increases in depression and anxiety symptoms among mothers who said the pandemic had disrupted their income or employment, those who had difficulty balancing home-schooling with work and other responsibilities, and those who struggled to obtain childcare.

The researchers are now following up with another survey to determine how mothers and their children are doing at this point in the pandemic. Even though the return to in-class learning for many children may have helped ease the burden on parents and COVID-19 vaccines are on their way, there's still a need to allocate resources and create policies to increase mental-health supports for families and mothers, Dr. Madigan said.

That includes making sure services such as tele-mental health are more easily and widely accessible, ensuring families have stable housing

and income supports, adopting employment policies that allow parents to create flexible schedules, and having conversations about sharing domestic and childcare duties, she said.

Ann-Marie O'Brien, a social worker and lead on the Women's Mental Health program at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, who was not involved in the study, said requests for her program's services have increased significantly during the pandemic. She also has seen no signs of falling demand. She emphasized a need for funding of mental-health services and clinical treatment services.

Ms. O'Brien said there's also a need to provide mental-health services across various sectors, from groups dealing with violence against women to perinatal health. "We have to get better at working collaboratively across systems," she said.

Ms. Kimmel, meanwhile, said she has since sought treatment, has received accommodations from her employer and has plenty of support from her partner. Still, she can't bring herself to think about the future.

"The fear that we're sitting on is just like a tinderbox," she said. "Everything feels tenuous."

Region: Canada ^[3]

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