

COVID-19 stress toll is a family affair: 4 ways to support mothers' mental health ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As we pass the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic, its impact on the mental health and well-being of children is undeniable. Indeed, news headlines on whether “the kids are alright” have frequently surfaced, bringing to light the immense challenges for kids, and their families, as they cope with ongoing changes during COVID-19, including online schooling and social distancing from friends.

While the lives and routines of children and youth have certainly been turned upside down over the last year, it is increasingly clear that the mental health impact of the pandemic is a family affair. Parents have lost child care, taken on home-school responsibilities, shifted to working from home and suffered from several additional stressors, such as job loss and changes in employment.

These COVID-19-related challenges have been especially hard on mothers, who are most likely to shoulder the burden of increased home-schooling and household demands. Our research team sought to find out if these stressors are linked to elevated rates of maternal mental health difficulties during the pandemic.

Parent mental health during COVID-19

Early reports during the pandemic pointed towards elevated rates of depression and anxiety, especially for mothers. What wasn't known was whether these rates truly demonstrated a shift in mothers' anxiety and depression symptoms, compared to how they were doing before the pandemic. To find answers to this question, we used data from mothers who have been taking part in long-term research, and compared their pandemic mental health to previous periods.

Over the past 12 years, the All Our Families Study has been following nearly 3,000 Canadian mothers and their children to better understand their health and well-being. Mothers were recruited into the study when they were pregnant, and their children are now nine to 11 years old.

In a recent study, we showed that between May and July of 2020, mothers in our study reported higher rates of depression and anxiety than they reported previously. Specifically, rates of depressive symptoms increased to 35 per cent during COVID-19 from 19 per cent before the pandemic, and rates of anxiety symptoms also jumped to 31 per cent from 18 per cent.

Maternal mental health difficulties are increasing

Increases in maternal mental health difficulties are not experienced uniformly by all mothers. In our study we saw especially high increases in mental health difficulties for mothers who reported losing their job or family income.

We also saw higher increases in anxiety and depression in mothers who had difficulty accessing child care, and who reported that they were struggling with balancing home-schooling with work responsibilities, regardless of income.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities that were deeply entrenched before the pandemic even happened. Specifically, women are more likely to be precariously employed, earn less income and take on the majority of household tasks and child care responsibilities. These gaps are even larger for low-income women and women of colour. A sustainable recovery plan following the pandemic needs to consider how families, but especially mothers, can be better supported in order to ensure optimal mental health for children and youth.

Strategies that promote family well-being

It is clear that the strain of the pandemic is taking a toll on mothers' mental health. This is concerning because we know that when mothers aren't doing well, their children are often struggling too. To ensure mothers are alright — knowing this will help their children be alright too — they need access to resources and support to help get through this difficult time.

Decades of research have shown that the well-being of mothers is critical for children and youth to flourish, which suggests maternal mental health and well-being should be a priority for COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts. We've identified four important ingredients for

a successful pandemic recovery for mothers and families.

1. Mental health supports for mothers

Maternal mental health was a national concern before the pandemic and our data demonstrate that there has been nearly a two-fold increase in depressive and anxiety symptoms in women with children under the age of 12.

Increased availability of mental health services that are easily and widely accessible are needed. An increase in uptake of tele-mental health services (mental health support that is provided online or by phone) has the potential to provide mothers with the opportunity to obtain mental health support while reducing barriers that often limit accessibility, such as location or time.

2. Ongoing support for family incomes

A major stressor that was associated with increases in mental health symptoms in our study was the loss or disruption of family income as a result of the pandemic.

Research has shown that maternal employment was hit harder during the pandemic than paternal employment. Recovery plans that include the support and provision of resources during a time of crisis will be critical in curtailing mental health difficulties that could ensue within families.

3. Shared responsibilities for home-schooling, child care and household tasks

Our findings showed that mothers who were having difficulties balancing multiple roles had higher rates of depression and anxiety. Although fathers have increased their participation in unpaid labour over the course of the pandemic, including child care and domestic tasks, there remains a deficit in these contributions between mothers and fathers.

As COVID-19 rages on, it is critical for policy-makers to invest in universal supports for child care and out-of-school care, and focus on providing flexible leave policies that allow both mothers and fathers to adequately care for and home-school their children.

4. Stable, safe, and affordable child care and schooling for children

Mothers in our study reported on their mental health at the outset of the pandemic, when schools and daycares were closed. The pandemic has highlighted that both our economy and the mental health and well-being of those who participate in it are dependent on high quality care and education for children.

Our study underscores that there is a devastating impact on families when child care and schooling are unavailable. To the extent possible, these services need to remain open for parents and children alike.

The pandemic's ongoing toll on families

One year on, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the well-being of families. The toll this has taken on mothers in terms of loss of jobs and increased child care and schooling responsibilities has had a marked effect on mental health.

Many traditional support networks have changed from in-person to virtual, due to physical distancing requirements. This can result in a loss of access to practical help. Support from friends, family and community are essential, but so is institutional support.

In times of crisis, families need access to stable supports including financial assistance and predictable child care and schooling. When caregivers are well supported, the whole family benefits.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: family policy ^[4]

mother's labour force participation ^[5]

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