

Changes to COVID restrictions likely to trigger more anxiety

May 6 2020



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The winding back of a limited number of COVID restrictions is likely to trigger a new wave of anxiety among Western Australians and it's crucial

that support is tailored to suit everyone's needs across the entire community, says Professor Colin MacLeod of The University of Western Australia's School of Psychological Science.

Change is threatening and a one-size-fits-all support strategy would fail to address widely differing needs in the community, including those who find it unsettling to gather again in groups of up to 10, those with [social anxiety](#), the elderly and vulnerable at risk and those with a history of [anxiety](#) or depressive disorders.

Western Australians should expect to feel apprehensive for a while after each restriction is eased, Professor MacLeod says, and it may be helpful to try to take the time to ensure personal behaviour is driven by a more "thoughtful evaluation of the current pandemic evidence" and not just an "evolutionary response" to the novelty of the situation.

"We are now seeing changes that are releasing us from some of these constraints, yet it is producing some anxiety," he said. "After strict lockdown, it does feel strange to be among people again when we have got so used to people being a source of threat, and it can be difficult to change that perception.

"If we don't pick up on that thought, and we continue to avoid all [social situations](#), we could get ourselves into a pattern of avoidance that would not be conducive in the long term to adaptive social functioning."

Professor MacLeod said not all anxiety was negative and in some situations it could be a helpful response that continued to play a protective role during the pandemic.

"Don't consider if you are feeling anxious that it is a sign something is wrong," he said. "The purpose of anxiety is to alert people to threats and have them thinking about ways to deal with these threats.

"In the COVID crisis, one could say that some people have not been anxious enough or that some societies have not been sufficiently anxious early enough to take the actions needed to mitigate the dangers of what we are being exposed to.

"Anxiety can be useful when the focus of that anxiety is threats that can be controlled through action and when the way in which we worry focuses on the actions we can take—such as washing hands and keeping a 1.5 metre distance.

"However such emotions as anxiety and depression can become problematic when they have no benefit, lead to you being highly self-critical, and start to interfere with social or occupational functioning. It's important to know these warning signs and take action early."

When it comes to supporting Western Australians through extended periods of social distancing and [social isolation](#), Professor MacLeod says it is vital to understand the variety of needs, who suffers what symptoms and the type of activities that help alleviate these symptoms.

Professor MacLeod, who has received international recognition for his work illuminating the types of cognitive biases that underlie emotional vulnerability and resilience, is working with a team of scientists from UWA's School of Psychological Science to understand the mental health effects of physical isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study aims to determine those most affected by mental health issues resulting from self-isolation and physical distancing, and what behaviour can help bolster resilience at an individual and community level. The study is a joint initiative between UWA, the Forrest Research Foundation, and the Minderoo Foundation.

"It is complicated what makes people vulnerable and what makes them

resilient," he said. "Many people are introverted and for them it may be that social isolation is relatively easy to deal with, and may be a release from some of the stresses that they experienced in more conventional everyday life. Others, however, have stronger social needs.

"Also, our capacity to use technology can affect the degree to which we experience the negative consequences of social isolation. This is one of the reasons why [older adults](#) are possibly our greatest concern. They have lost some of their social support friends but are also perhaps the least adept at making full use of social technology.

"An important responsibility that younger family members have is to upskill older adults in how to exploit the benefits of technology to maintain physical distancing while reducing social distancing.

"I think what multiplies the problems that have resulted from the adversity of COVID is that the way in which we as a community have had to respond to reduce this adversity is to reduce socialisation, but this also restricts the availability of the social support that most of us would have used to ameliorate the emotional impact of the adversity.

"It's a new thing to have both a new adversity and a reduction in the availability of social support."

Volunteers can sign up for the study at www.thecarestudy.com

Provided by University of Western Australia

Citation: Changes to COVID restrictions likely to trigger more anxiety (2020, May 6) retrieved 31 March 2023 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-covid-restrictions-trigger-anxiety.html>

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