

Understanding how pandemic conditions affect individuals with mood disorders

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A collaborative study between Swinburne and University of Melbourne researchers has found that individuals with a pre-existing mood disorder reported higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress during the early stages of the COVID-19 situation when compared to individuals with no mental disorder. The study, which was conducted by researchers from Swinburne's Center for Mental Health and the Melbourne Neuropsychiatry Center as part of the COVID-19 and you: mental health in Australia now survey (COLLATE), has been published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

"The physical-isolation strategies implemented by the Australian Government to contain COVID-19 transmissions, while absolutely necessary, were particularly aversive for individuals with pre-existing [mood disorders](#)," explains lead author and Senior Research Fellow at Swinburne, Dr. Tamsyn Van Rheenen.

"These strategies disrupt a myriad of factors critical to the management of clinical and cognitive symptoms, including easy access to in-person [psychiatric care](#) and stability in daily routines,

social rhythms and sleep patterns," she adds.

Increased levels of anxiety linked to lifestyle changes

Of the respondents who completed the anonymous online COLLATE survey, 29 percent self-reported a [mood](#) disorder (either bipolar or depressive disorder) while 71 percent did not report any mental disorder. Participants were then asked to rank their key concerns relating to the COVID-19 situation.

The top four concerns for both groups were related to the health and wellbeing of loved ones, including loved ones catching or dying from COVID-19, and the health and wellbeing of society.

Of the respondents who reported a mood disorder, "Risk of unemployment or reduced employment," "Access to appropriate [medical care](#)," and "Personal finances" were ranked in the top 10 most endorsed concerns by respondents with bipolar disorder, while those with depressive disorder instead endorsed "Catching COVID -19 myself," and "Australian economy" within their top 10 concerns.

Additionally, changes to lifestyle behaviors known to be important for emotional stability were more prevalent in individuals with a mood disorder compared to those with no [mental disorder](#). A higher proportion of individuals with a mood disorder reported less social contact with others outside the home, getting more or less sleep and drinking more since COVID-19 started. Further, a higher proportion of these individuals expected it to take longer for life to return to normal or perceived a negative impact of government restrictions on [mental health](#).

Providing greater support

"From the perspective of mood stability, the high proportion of individuals reporting COVID-19

related changes in situational and lifestyle factors key to its maintenance is concerning," Dr. Van Rheenen explains.

These [lifestyle changes](#) were tied to elevated levels of psychological distress in all respondents, but particularly those with mood disorder.

"From a clinical care perspective, psychoeducation in the form of healthy lifestyle-based guidance and closer psychiatric monitoring of individuals with mood disorder who report these lifestyle changes, is going to be necessary. This is particularly important because many individuals with mood disorder already have compromised physical health and unhealthy lifestyle behaviors resulting from the COVID-19 containment strategies are likely to exacerbate this." Dr. Van Rheenen concludes.

The COLLATE study is an Australia-wide, online survey that opens for 72 hours at the beginning of each month. You can participate in future COLLATE surveys using this [link](#).

More information: Tamsyn E. Van Rheenen et al. Mental health status of individuals with a mood-disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia: Initial results from the COLLATE project, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2020.06.037](#)

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

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