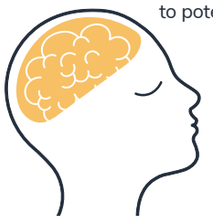
Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder during the COVID-19 Pandemic

February to May 2021 Data from the Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health[1]

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)



PTSD is a mental disorder that can happen after exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic events (e.g., actual or threatened death, natural disasters, violence).

Symptoms of PTSD include recurring and distressing memories, avoiding reminders of the event(s), and disturbed sleep.[2]

PTSD and the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted individuals, families, and communities in many ways.

Stressors from the pandemic may increase the number of Canadians experiencing symptoms of PTSD. Those who already had PTSD may experience more severe symptoms.

A diagnosis of PTSD requires a trained and licensed clinician. The Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health used a symptom-based screening tool to identify individuals with moderate to severe symptoms of PTSD (i.e., those who would screen positive for PTSD).[3]

Symptoms of PTSD in Canadians 18+

63% of Canadians have experienced at least one **traumatic event** in their lifetime.

7% of Canadians screened positive for **PTSD**.[3] This prevalence was:

Higher among **women** than men

9% 6%

Highest among those **aged 18–34**

16% 7%

Lowest among those **aged 65+**

2%

Higher among **frontline workers**[4] than other Canadians

11% 7%

Impacts of COVID-19

Compared to those who did not screen positive for PTSD, those who screened positive were about **2** to **3.5X more likely** to report being impacted by the pandemic in terms of:

- Difficulty meeting financial obligations/ essential needs
- Death of a family member, friend, or colleague
- Physical health problems
- Challenges in personal relationships with household members

Mental health-related issues

Compared to those who did not screen positive for PTSD, those who screened positive were **more likely** to report:

- Symptoms of anxiety or depression[5] in the past 2 weeks — **6 to 7X**
- Thoughts of suicide in their lifetime — **4X**
- Increased cannabis use since the beginning of the pandemic — **3.5X**
- Daily cannabis use in the past month — **2X**
- Increased alcohol use since the beginning of the pandemic — **2X**
- Heavy drinking[6] in the past month — **1.5X**

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The Government of Canada recognizes the tremendous impact that PTSD has on individuals, families, communities, and workplaces. If you or someone you know is in crisis or needs mental health support, visit Wellness Together Canada for a wide range of resources.

VISIT
Canada.ca website on The Federal Framework on PTSD/
Canada.ca website on Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

GET DATA
Mental Illness during the Pandemic: Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health

MORE
Download the PTSD Coach Canada mobile app developed by Veterans Affairs Canada/
Mental health support: Get help / Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Awareness resources

REFERENCES AND NOTES:

1. Statistics Canada. Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health (SCMH). 2021 (Retrieved December 2021). Available from: https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5330.
2. American Psychiatric Association. Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders. In Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). 2022 (Retrieved August 2022). Available from: https://dsm.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787.x07_Trauma_and_Stressor_Related_Disorders.
3. Individuals screened positive for PTSD if they had a total score of ≥33 on the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5). Screening positive does not necessarily indicate a diagnosis. Available from: www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/adult-sr/ptsd-checklist.asp.
4. A frontline worker was defined as "an individual who has the potential to come in direct contact with COVID-19 by assisting those who have been diagnosed with the virus." Examples provided were "police officers, firefighters, paramedics, nurses or doctors."
5. Moderate to severe anxiety and depression were represented by scores of ≥10 on the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) and Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) respectively. Scores on these screening tools do not necessarily indicate a diagnosis.
6. Heavy drinking was defined as 4+ alcoholic drinks for women and 5+ alcoholic drinks for men in one sitting.

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