

NATIONAL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

# What impact could the lockdown have on our mental health?

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By [Liam Mannix](#)

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Social distancing policies introduced in Australia to slow the spread of COVID-19 could have a devastating impact on our mental health, experts warn.

Professor Patrick McGorry, executive director of mental health research hub Orygen, is calling for the government to weigh the nation's mental health along with its physical and economic wellbeing when deciding on how to navigate the crisis.



What effect will the lockdowns have on our mental health? ISTOCKPHOTO

"The second wave of mental ill health could overshadow the first wave of infection in long-term impact," he said.

Calls to mental health service Beyond Blue's helplines has jumped 30 per cent in the past two weeks. The organisation has also launched a [dedicated COVID-19 service](#).

A preliminary study led by the University of Adelaide's Associate Professor Stephen Zhang [published last week](#) suggests more than one in 10 people in Chinese cities hardest-hit by the virus report levels of psychological distress, with those who stopped working most at risk, although it is not yet clear if that was caused by the lockdowns.

And a review of the evidence published in *The Lancet* last month found those forced into quarantine generally display high levels of psychological distress. In the long-term, alcohol abuse and addiction levels rise.

The longer the quarantine, it seems, the worse the symptoms.

Social isolation, unemployment, grief, and the stress of living through a crisis are all individually associated with psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, alcohol abuse, psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Australia is now experiencing all those things at the same time.

Such an event has not been rigorously studied before, meaning researchers are unsure what will happen - but some are worried.

Societies that experienced a crisis tended to see a roughly 20 per cent increase in new cases of mental illness, Professor McGorry said.

"We can expect the mental health consequences of this disaster to be more severe than the mental health consequences of a bushfire or an earthquake. We have got a population-wide exposure."

Government policy needed to take into account the effect prolonged social distancing measures would have on people's mental health as well as the effect on infection rates, he said.

"A massive economic downturn, it will cause society to fracture and even disintegrate. The consequences of an economic collapse will be much more severe and long-lasting."

Long-term stress appears to push our bodies into fight-or-flight mode. "And we're already in a state of threat because of the virus," said Professor Jo Badcock, a leading mental illness researcher affiliated with the University of Western Australia.

This biases us towards negative thinking, stress, and withdrawal from social situations – which in turn can increase loneliness.

A substantial body of evidence now links loneliness to serious mental and physical health risks.

Patrick\* describes himself as having high-functioning autism. "That makes it hard enough to connect to people as-is," he said.

Then came the lockdown. "There was a sense of the walls closing in."

Patrick now finds himself struggling with cognitive issues researchers have linked to loneliness.

"I feel like I've pretty much lost all sense of time. My memory has taken quite a steep decline."

Loneliness "impairs our cardiovascular function, our immune response, our respiratory functioning, alters our sleep patterns," said Professor Badcock.

"It's related to pretty much all the mental health issues: anxiety, stress, depression, psychotic phenomena. It also leads to difficulties with our ability to think, make decisions. An increase in the onset of dementia. These are not trivial issues."

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That seems to be because evolution has hard-wired us for social connection.

And the consequences of poor mental health can be intergenerational.

"If couples go through really, really stressful life events, some will be able to recover for that and some won't. If you have a higher rate of separation or conflict, that has impacts on children's development," said Dr Elizabeth Westrupp, a Deakin University clinical psychologist.

*\*Patrick asked that only his first name be published*

**If you or anyone you know needs support call [Lifeline](#) 131 114, or [beyondblue](#) 1300 224 636.**



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