

PTSD link to pandemic fears

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Even at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, people around the world became more fearful of what could happen to them or their family.

A new Flinders University study of 1,040 online participants from five [western countries](#) published in *PLOS ONE* explores people's response to the stresses of the escalating pandemic, finding more than 13% of the sample had post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) related symptoms consistent with levels necessary to qualify for a clinical diagnosis.

With ongoing economic and social fallout, and death toll of more than 2 million, the team of psychology researchers warn more needs to be done to cope with the potential short and long-term spike in PTSD cases resulting from the pandemic—as well as related mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, psychosocial functioning, etc.

"While the global pandemic does not fit into prevailing PTSD models, or [diagnostic criteria](#), our research shows this ongoing global stressor can trigger traumatic stress symptoms," says lead researcher Associate Professor Melanie Takarangi, from Flinders Psychology.

"We found that traumatic stress was related to future events, such as worry about oneself or a family member contracting COVID-19, to direct contact with the virus, as well as indirect contact such as via the news and government lockdown—a non-life threatening event," says co-author Victoria Bridgland, who is undertaking a Ph.D. studying the triggers of PTSD.

PTSD is a set of reactions, including intrusive recollections such as flashbacks, that can develop in people exposed to an event that threatened their life or safety (e.g. sexual assault, natural disaster).

"Our findings highlight the need to focus on the acute psychological distress—including the perceived emotional impact of particular events—associated with COVID-19 and build on other research from the past year that demonstrates the damaging psychological impact of COVID-19 on mental health," says Ms Bridgland.

Comprehensive long-term documentation of COVID-19 related traumatic [stress](#) reactions will allow health professionals to help people who could otherwise fall through the cracks, the research team concludes.

The [online survey](#) examined a range of responses to common post-[traumatic stress](#) symptoms, such as repeated disturbing and unwanted images, memories or thoughts about the COVID-19 [pandemic](#).

COVID-19's psychological fallout has been dubbed the "second curve," predicted to last for months to years, the paper notes.

"Notably, while most of our participants reported experiencing some form of psychological distress and 13.2% of our sample were likely PTSD positive when anchoring symptoms to COVID-19, only 2% of our total sample reported they had personally tested positive to COVID-19, and only 5% reported that close family and friends had tested positive.

"It therefore seems likely that the psychological fallout from COVID-19 may reach further than the medical fallout," the paper concludes.

More information: Victoria M. E. Bridgland et al. Why the COVID-19 pandemic is a traumatic stressor, *PLOS ONE* (2021). DOI: [10.1371/journal.pone.0240146](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240146)

Provided by Flinders University

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