

Changes in mental health and help-seeking among young Australian adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: a prospective cohort study

the drinking and teens project



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Background

There is growing evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic and the social restrictions imposed to prevent its spread are causing a significant impact on the burden of global mental health, with cross-sectional research showing elevated levels of depression, anxiety, PTSD and stress in the general population (1-4).

There is particular concern for the mental health of young people who may disproportionately experience some of the psychosocial stressors associated with the pandemic (5, 6), such as disruption to or loss of paid work, tertiary education and workplace training (5, 6).

This age demographic are at particular risk of mental health problems generally: the majority of lifetime mental health disorders present before the age of 26 (7). Young people also have some of the lowest rates of engagement in mental health treatment (8, 9), and social distancing practices may form a further barrier to treatment access during the pandemic (6).

Although some studies internationally have shown elevated levels of depression, anxiety and stress in young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic (10, 11), there have been no studies to date focused on the impacts of the pandemic and associated restrictions on the mental health of young adult Australians specifically. Further, these studies have been predominantly cross-sectional in nature, highlighting the necessity for prospective, longitudinal data which facilitates comparison of mental health and help-seeking before and during COVID-19 restrictions.

Aims

This study used data from the Australian Parental Supply of Alcohol Longitudinal Study (APSALS; 12) to:

- 1) Assess prospective change in mental health (i.e., anxiety and depression symptoms) in this young adult sample since COVID-19 restrictions
- 2) Assess changes in help-seeking for mental health problems since COVID-19 restrictions

Methods

This study used the APSALS cohort of 1927 young people (12) who have been completing annual surveys of their alcohol use and health outcomes since 2010 (mean age: 12.9 years).

Participants who had completed Wave 10 up to April 30 2020 were invited to complete an additional 10-minute online survey via Qualtrics assessing their experiences during COVID-19 restrictions with the opportunity to win a \$AUD500 gift voucher. Of 813 participants invited, 443 completed COVID-19 surveys (54% response rate) between 18 May and 25 June 2020. Data used here are drawn from Wave 10 and the COVID-19 survey (n=443).

Measures

Wave 10 and COVID-19 Survey (prospective)

- **Patient Health Questionnaire – Depression Module (PHQ-9; 13):** a reliable and widely validated brief measure of depression symptoms (13) based on DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for Major Depressive Disorder (14)
- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7; 15):** a brief self-report scale shown to have strong reliability and validity in identifying probable cases of DSM-IV-classified Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD; 14, 15)

COVID-19 Survey only (retrospective)

- **Help seeking:** Participants were asked whether they had sought help for their mental health from a general practitioner (GP) or other qualified health professional (e.g. psychiatrist, psychologist, counsellor) in the month of February and in the past month.

Results

Sample characteristics

The COVID-19 sample was generally similar to the broader APSALS cohort but was more likely to be female (60.8% compared with 49.3%).

Depression symptoms (PHQ-9)

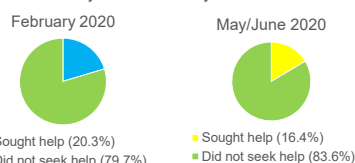
There was a significant increase in the mean scores for depression in May-June 2020 (m=7.2, SD=6.2) as compared to August 2019-March 2020 (m=6.0, SD=5.9), after controlling for covariates (1.29; 95% CI 0.72, 1.86, Figure 1). More than half the sample reported at least 'Minimal' or higher levels of symptoms at both time points (50.6% and 57.6% respectively; see Table 1).

Generalised Anxiety Disorder symptoms (GAD-7)

There was also a significant increase in mean GAD scores from August 2019-March 2020 (m=5.0, SD=5.2) to May-June 2020 (m=5.7, SD=5.7), after controlling for covariates (0.78; 95% CI 0.26, 1.31, Figure 1). Just under half the sample reported symptoms consistent with at least 'Mild' or above anxiety at both time points (43.6% and 48.3% respectively; see Table 1).

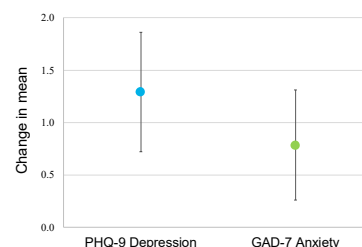
Changes in help-seeking

Overall rates in help-seeking from health professionals for mental health in the sample were one in five or less (February: 20.3%; May-June: 16.4%). There was no overall change in reported help seeking for mental health between February 2020 and May-June 2020



The Difference is Research

Figure 1. Change in depression and anxiety score during COVID-19 restrictions compared to APSALS Wave 10



Implications

- This study provides unique, prospective data showing a significant increase in symptoms of depression and anxiety (GAD) in this large cohort of young Australian adults from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic (February to May/June 2020).
- Levels of anxiety and depression symptoms were high in this population at May/June 2020, with one-third of the sample scoring at or above the clinical cut-off for likely presence of disorder, higher than several other cross-sectional studies of the general adult population in Australia at this time (e.g., 3)
- Despite significant increases in anxiety and depression symptoms over the course of the pandemic, self-reported levels of help-seeking from mental health professionals were low and did not change over the same time period.

Conclusion

This study adds to the current cross-sectional literature to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions are having a significant impact on the mental health of young Australian adults. Further, this population are an important target for increasing access to mental health treatment particularly in the current climate of social distancing.

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