

How the pandemic has impacted households and relationships

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought hardships in various aspects of people's lives for the past year, significantly impacting individual's mental health and relationships.

The pandemic has led to self-isolation away from friends and family, creating a void and deprivation of social contact.

Whether it be not seeing your parents, siblings, grandparents, partners or friends, humans rely on social connections.

According to the Centre Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), people self-isolating or quarantining may experience a series of different emotions including anger, fear, sadness, irritability, guilt and confusion.

Families and couples as well endure challenges when being cooped up together for large quantities of time, which can lead to conflict.

Trish McLean, founder of psychotherapy and counselling group The Story Isn't Over, located in Bolton, shared issues that families', couples' and children's mental health goes through while coping in a pandemic.

"The tension on relationships, the tension on marriages during this pandemic has been intense," she said. "Very early on in the pandemic there was awareness of an increase of domestic violence, and then as times carried on, the impact on marriages where there isn't domestic violence going on is being felt as more people are getting divorced, more and more people are experiencing significant stresses and conflict that are leading them to seek help or separate."

A major concern this brought for individuals stuck in domestic violence relationships or households, is the ability to leave being lessened due to health restrictions.

"People who were in domestic violence situations, who were being abused in any way at all, were pinned inside the house, kept inside the houses and couldn't get out again," said McLean. "If you take away that little freedom, they have to get outside the house and make or to go to an appointment, they lose that contact."

As the pandemic seemed to worsen as time went on, provincial and federal instructions told residents to remain at home, work remotely, and the majority of children to begin online classes at home.

With the entire household together consistently day to day, the attempt to retain a sense of normalcy can create dramatic impacts and stresses within the home.

"You've got the initial pressure on the marriage of everyone being together, then you add the stresses of job loss, loss of income, financial stresses, social pressures," explained McLean. "Then you've got the whole anxiety related to the pandemic."

"Some people," she added, "pull together in pressure and some people make it, but some people who were ticking along or who already had tensions, it just escalated through the roof."

People begin to seek help who've never needed it in the past. Individuals who have never experienced mental health issues in their life begin to experience waves of depression and anxiety because of these pressures and stressors that have pushed them.

With schools consistently changing and adapting to the level of severity the pandemic is at, students are struggling to keep up with school, not socializing with their peers, and not fully understanding the severity of the pandemic.

Due to many classes switching to online, students fail to get the proper help they need which leads into falling off the edge. But McLean sees children bouncing back and catching up when they need to and should focus on taking care of their mental health.

“Kids are very resilient and especially these kids who are very young, that the priority is the family,” she said. “The priority is the wellbeing of the family, the health of the parents, and not the education of a young child, because they'll catch up.”

The Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) reported over 60 per cent of youth stated feeling different emotions such as worried, upset, sad and angry about the constant changes of the school year, not socializing with their friends and peers and the uncertainty of the future.

CMHO also reported 59 per cent of parents noticed behavioral changes in their children which included extreme irritability and downwards mood changes, trouble sleeping, sadness and different personality changes.

“We're going to have to give them a lot of support through this. There will always be some kids who are more impacted than others,” said McLean. “The high priority is their emotional and mental health and facilitating as far as possible for them to have as normal a life.”

The Story Isn't Over remains open for individuals, children and couples to reach out to seek help. With the necessary safety measures in place, their services have been able to continue to help those who are struggling drastically.

The team at The Story Isn't Over does significant work providing supports for couples to have a healthy relationship and to resolve conflict, as well as if separation is happening, they provide help that prioritizes the children.

“Keeping life as normal as possible, keeping a regular schedule, making time to get dressed, get a shower and get up, going outside has to be the number one thing at this point. Keeping a routine is going to be very helpful,” said McLean. “Build into structure regular mealtimes, regular study times and a lot of outside time.”

To learn more about different ways to cope amid the pandemic, or if in need of support, please visit thestoryisntover.ca or call (416) 616-2207 to book an appointment.