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## Albertans turning to alcohol, cannabis as they deal with symptoms of PTSD throughout prolonged pandemic

People who have never before struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are beginning to show symptoms of PTSD and turning to substances such as alcohol and cannabis to help them cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. A suite of studies by University of Lethbridge researcher Dr. Cheryl Currie has identified that many adults are looking for help for these problems in Alberta.

Currie, an epidemiologist and public health professor, surveyed approximately 900 adults in June 2020 who had no previous diagnosis of PTSD. She found people who are grappling to find coping mechanisms.



“Pandemic-related PTSD symptoms were common among Alberta adults in this study. Nightmares, intrusive thoughts about COVID-19 and feeling constantly on guard were frequently reported,” says Currie. “In some ways, the pandemic has many people stuck in fight-or-flight mode due to a combination of fear, ongoing social and economic impacts, and unpredictability regarding when it will finally be over.”

The [study](#) showed about a third of women and a quarter of men reported they were going out of their way to avoid thinking about COVID-19.

“That’s where substance use comes in,” says Currie. “Adults who reported large increases in their substance use during the pandemic noted they were trying hard to not think about it.”

While using substances to avoid thoughts and emotions is not unusual in society, the protracted nature of the pandemic has Currie wondering about the longer-term impacts of this strategy. She notes 13 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men were already

reporting large increases in their alcohol and cannabis use in the first wave of the pandemic.

“Will people be able to return to pre-pandemic substance use levels once the COVID-19 crisis ends, or will we see elevated use and problems longer term? Alcohol consumption in Canada is already higher than the global average, and among the highest among developed countries,” she says.

Currie found the strongest predictor of pandemic related PTSD symptoms was whether adults thought they were going to contract COVID in the next year. She also found that it was Albertans in a younger demographic, aged 18-34 years, who were more likely to report pandemic-related PTSD symptoms.

“More than a quarter of young adults had significant pandemic-related PTSD symptoms in this study,” she says. “Young adults were also more likely to report pandemic-related job loss, and were more likely to be single and have a lower income. The data suggest the social and financial repercussions of the pandemic are having a greater impact on their mental health than other adults.”

Her other key finding highlights just how substantially the pandemic has affected Albertans.

“Most people do not admit to needing help for substance use and mental health problems because there’s a stigma attached to it,” says Currie. “Yet, in this study, almost half of adults struggling with substance use or their mental health wanted help. There is this feeling of isolation during the pandemic. Quite a few of them said, “You know, I actually just need more friends for support. I don't have enough friends right now”.”

Many adults also reported the need for help from health professionals to address their substance use and mental health problems during the pandemic — including physicians and psychological counsellors.

Recognizing the need, Currie and her team [scoured the literature](#) to see if there were effective health-professional led interventions that could be delivered to groups online, thus providing adults with both the social support and health-professional guidance they were looking for, while still remaining physically apart. They came up empty. Currie then initiated a randomized control trial (RCT) with women to address this gap in the science.

“We have begun this work with women as they report more pandemic-related PTSD symptoms. My team and I have now enrolled more than 400 women from across Alberta who are struggling with substance use and other addictions during the pandemic. We are testing if therapist-led interventions delivered online in a live, group

videoconference format can help women with these problems. This work is underway, with results ready in late summer.”

Currie’s goal is to identify clinically effective and cost-efficient interventions governments and organizations can offer to large numbers of adults seeking help for pandemic-related substance use and mental health problems.

“As many have said, the mental health impacts of the pandemic will follow us long into the future. The key question is what are we going to do about it.”

To view online: <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/albertans-turning-alcohol-cannabis-they-deal-symptoms-ptsd-throughout-prolonged-pandemic>

-- 30 --

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