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Institute of Neurosciences,  
Mental Health and Addiction  
Institut des neurosciences, de la  
santé mentale et des toxicomanies

# COVID-19 and Mental Health Initiative **Virtual Learning Series**

## **EVENT SUMMARY:** IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE



**Date:** May 4, 2021

**Time:** 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. ET



Canadian Institutes  
of Health Research

Instituts de recherche  
en santé du Canada

Canada

# Event Summary

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## Background

Since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020, the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and substance use needs of Canadians has been unprecedented — and this new crisis exacerbates existing issues and inequities across the country.

As part of the Government of Canada’s rapid response to address the public health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the [Canadian Institutes of Health Research’s Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction \(CIHR-INMHA\)](#), in collaboration with [Health Canada](#), the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) and institute partners, launched the [COVID-19 and Mental Health \(CMH\) Initiative](#).

This initiative provides urgent evidence to decision makers and practitioners to support mental health and substance use responses in the context of COVID-19. Three funding opportunities were launched under this initiative, supporting more than 100 projects with a total investment of \$13.5 million from CIHR and partners.

## Event Description

On May 4, 2021, during Mental Health Awareness Week, CIHR-INMHA hosted the first event as part of the COVID-19 and Mental Health (CMH) Initiative Virtual Learning Series: [Impacts of COVID-19 on women’s mental health and substance use](#). The event brought together researchers, policy makers, community members, people with lived and living expertise, partners and other [knowledge users](#).

The focus of this online event was the disproportionate impact that the pandemic is having on women — a cross-cutting theme that emerged from the analysis of 45 projects funded through the [Knowledge Synthesis: COVID-19 in Mental Health and Substance Use](#).

The objectives of the *Impacts of COVID-19 on women’s mental health and substance use* event were to:

- maximize the rapid sharing and uptake of knowledge generated through CMH funded projects related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women’s mental health and substance use;
- support collaborative discourse between researchers and knowledge users to translate research findings into programs, practices and policies; and
- raise awareness of the impact of the research generated on health outcomes.

Miss Jennifer O’Connell, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, provided opening remarks on behalf of the Minister of Health, the Honourable Patty Hajdu. Seven funded teams of researchers, knowledge users and people with lived and living expertise presented on the impact of COVID-19 on women’s mental health and substance use. This research includes mental health services outcomes, practice delivery and guidelines and related issues.

The event was divided into two sessions and included the following presentations from researchers, knowledge users and people with lived and living expertise:

### Session 1: Substance Use

[\*Digital health solutions to support women with addiction during COVID-19: Applying a gender- and trauma-informed lens\*](#)

Lena Quilty (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health); Betty-Lou Kristy (Centre for Innovation in Peer Support)

[\*Gender and addiction-related intervention among individuals in situations of social precarity in the context of a pandemic\*](#)

Karine Bertrand (Université de Sherbrooke); Chelsea Grothé (CACTUS Montreal)

[\*Intimate partner violence and substance use in a pandemic context: Implications for substance use provider, anti-violence workers and first responders\*](#)

Lorraine Greaves, Nancy Poole, Andreea Brabete and Lindsay Wolfson (Centre of Excellence for Women's Health)

### Session 2: Mental Health

[\*Mobilizing knowledge on the use of virtual or remote-based trauma-focused interventions for individuals experiencing and at risk of domestic violence during COVID-19\*](#)

Stephanie Montesanti (University of Alberta); Amy Munroe (Sagesse)

[\*Pandemic, stress and burnout among female health care workers\*](#)

Abi Sriharan (University of Toronto); Savithiri Ratnapalan (Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto)

[\*Social isolation and loneliness in older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: A knowledge synthesis of pre- and post-COVID-19 interventions, vulnerability and resilience factors\*](#)

Laurette Dubé (McGill University); Catherine Paquet (Université Laval)

[\*The global burden of mental illness in family caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic\*](#)

Monica Parry (University of Toronto); Nicole Nickerson (Patient Partner); Amy Coupal (The Ontario Caregiver Organization)

## Key Findings and Recommendations

Some key findings and recommendations from the event include the following:

- The **stigma of substance use — including self-stigma and community stigma — presents a key barrier to women** seeking support. Disruption in services for women who use substances has negative consequences (e.g., reduced access to feminine hygiene products, less social support including for women with children and for 2SLGBTQ+ people), and a range of measures must be developed to ensure access to a continuum of harm reduction and treatment services.
- Research in women's mental health and substance use is complex, and an **intersectional approach is essential** (e.g., considering gender, race, ethnicity, poverty, parenting, violence, trauma, stigma, safety and other diverse identities).

- **Engaging people with lived and living expertise as partners in research and collaborative care teams from the outset** provides a critical voice to inform future research and policy. People with lived and living expertise provide valuable peer support for many population groups, including people who use drugs and people who have experienced trauma.
- **Digital health services (e.g., web-based multimedia, mobile applications) for substance use disorder demonstrate therapeutic benefits for adults**, but more research is required on their effectiveness for females or women due to a lack of sex- or gender-based analysis (SGBA+) in empirical investigations of digital health resources. When determining which digital health resources may benefit clients, substance use treatment providers should consider apps and web-based tools that are gender- and trauma-informed.
- **Women health care workers are experiencing increased stress and burnout** due to COVID-19 and related public health measures. As there is limited information regarding interventions to support the well-being of women health care workers during a pandemic, there is an urgent need for more research in this area.
- **Maintaining social connections and addressing loneliness are important factors** for mental wellness in older populations. Older women may be at a higher risk for loneliness due to longer life expectancy. Many strategies to improve social connections (e.g., group interventions with educational and social support, activity or purpose-based gatherings, participatory involvement in activities) may not be feasible within the COVID-19 context. More research is needed on social connections in older populations, both within the context of infectious disease outbreaks and beyond.
- **Maintaining access to mental health and substance use care for vulnerable populations (including women and 2SLGBTQ+ people) is critical.** This includes ensuring that appropriate technology and provider training and supervision are available. Providers must be careful not to inadvertently perpetuate access inequities (e.g., pivoting to virtual care without a concurrent plan around addressing resource-related barriers to access). Sex and gender diversity must factor into the adaptation of services during the pandemic to prevent further health inequities, especially for women and 2SLGBTQ+ people who experience substance use.
- **Disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are associated with a rise in intimate partner violence**, which contribute to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health issues. Related mental health conditions such as depression and trauma require ongoing service support.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased mental health challenges and substance-related harms for many Canadians, particularly women. Policy responses to pandemics, such as isolation and lockdowns, exacerbate issues. There is a **need for more research on the current and long-term effects of COVID-19 on women.**

## For More Information

The program for this Virtual Learning Series event is available [online](#).

A searchable repository of the funded knowledge syntheses, as well as other projects funded through the CMH Initiative, can be found online: <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/52079.html>

To stay up to date on the latest brain and mental health research, including new knowledge on COVID-19 and Mental Health and Substance Use, [subscribe to the CIHR-INMHA newsletter](#).



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