

Depression and anxiety in Australian gay and bisexual men prior to and during COVID-19 restrictions

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Background: In response to COVID-19, Australian governments introduced physical distancing measures in late March. We examined depression and anxiety prior to and during COVID-19 restrictions in a cohort of gay and bisexual men (GBM).

Methods: Flux is an ongoing prospective cohort since 2014 of Australian GBM involving 6-monthly online surveys. In April 2020, 940 participants responded to questions about COVID-19. During 2019, and again in April 2020, 681 men completed the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9, measuring depression) and Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7, measuring anxiety). Increased depression and anxiety were defined as a ≥ 5 point increase on the respective scales.

Results: PHQ-9 (mean=5.98, SD=5.93) and GAD-7 (mean=4.54, SD=4.95) scores remained stable between 2014 and 2019. Mean PHQ-9 increased to 6.56 (SD=6.03) in 2020 ($p=0.004$). Almost one in five participants ($n=121$, 17.8%) increased ≥ 5 points on the PHQ-9; in these men, mean PHQ-9 score increased from 4.11 (SD=4.21) in 2019 to 12.78 (SD=5.61) in 2020 ($p<0.001$). Mean GAD-7 score increased to 4.96 (SD=5.07) in 2020 ($p=0.015$). 104 participants (15.3%) increased ≥ 5 points on the GAD-7; within these men, mean GAD-7 score increased from 3.46 (SD=3.83) in 2019 to 11.15 (SD=4.85) in 2020 ($p<0.001$). Factors associated with increased depression/anxiety included: concerns about losing employment ($p<0.001/p=0.005$) and avoiding social venues ($p=0.025/p=0.002$). Increased depression was associated with avoiding sex ($p=0.020$) and having less casual sex ($p=0.043$), while concerns about contracting COVID-19 ($p=0.024$) and fears about an overwhelmed health system were associated with increased anxiety ($p=0.003$).

Conclusion: A substantial minority of GBM experienced significant declines in mental health following the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions. Both anxiety and depression were associated with more general COVID-19-related concerns, but there was a particular association between reduced sexual connection and depression.

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