

Helpline calls spike as Sydneysiders struggle with the lockdown loneliness and anxiety

By [Caitlin Fitzsimmons](#) and [Andrew Taylor](#)

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The swelling COVID-19 outbreak and the extension of lockdown for four more weeks has left Sydneysiders grappling with mental health and addiction problems, with helplines and services reporting a spike in demand.

Demand for Lifeline services in NSW was 10 per cent higher in July than a year ago and 29 per cent higher than in 2019, before COVID-19. The service is now fielding 222 more calls a day in NSW than before the pandemic.



Costa Georgiadis says gardening benefits your mental health. LOUISE KENNERLEY

Lifeline chairman John Brogden said the organisation expected high demand for services will continue during the Sydney lockdown and beyond, “because these kinds of events leave a long tail of trauma”.

“The loneliness and anxiety that come with a continued lockdown in NSW have an impact on everyone in the community,” he said. “For those already struggling this can be devastating.”

Australia’s Mental Health Think Tank in June reported that Australia was facing a “mental health ‘shadow pandemic’ ” and this was similar to other countries with higher rates of COVID-19 infection and deaths.

A Beyond Blue spokesman said demand for its services spiked by about 14 per cent with any lockdown, but had increased by 20 per cent during Sydney's latest lockdown. More than half of callers were aged 15 to 24, with concerns ranging from anxiety to relationship pressure and financial stress.

Professor Maree Teesson, director of the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney, said news of four more weeks of lockdown and higher case numbers had come when people were already suffering pandemic fatigue and feeling fear, anxiety and hopelessness for the future.

"We have not all bounced back," she said. "For many people these current lockdowns have hit when their mental health resources were already low."

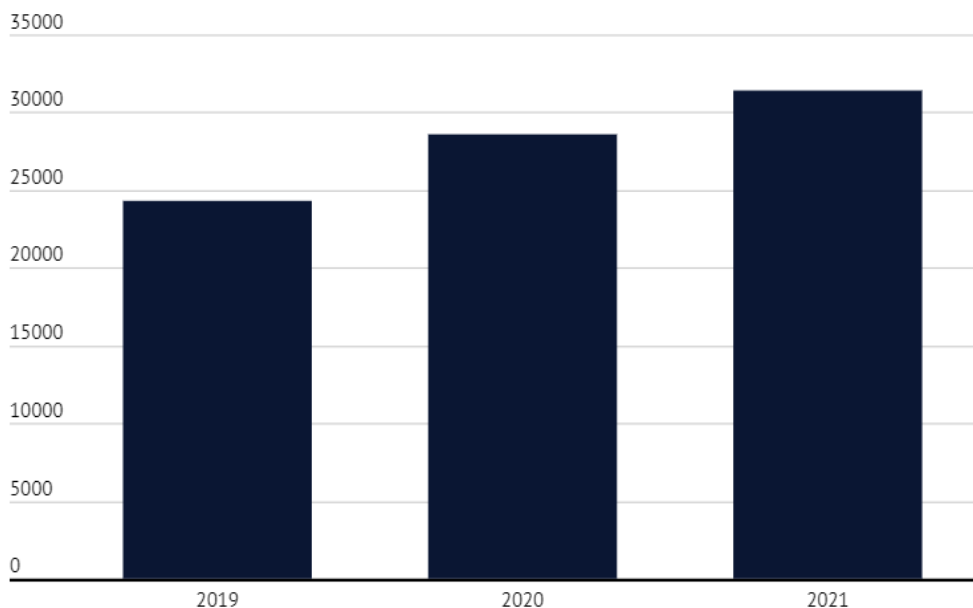
Professor Teesson said the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on mental health had hit some people harder than others and young adults had the highest levels of anxiety and depression.

Tamara Cavenett, president of the Australian Psychological Society, said experiencing ups and downs during lockdown or in a pandemic was normal, "but what we want to pay attention to are significant or prolonged changes in behaviour".

"If you're a daily runner but struggling to find motivation to exercise, or you're usually very social but feeling increasingly withdrawn, these might be signs you need additional support," she said.

A cry for help

Demand for Lifeline services in NSW in three consecutive Julys



Source: Lifeline figures for service demand, June 26 to June 27 of each year.

South Pacific Private, a private rehab provider on the northern beaches, says COVID-19 is fuelling dysfunctional behaviour, from excessive porn use to online gambling, both of which can lead to addiction.

The number of patients presenting with gambling addiction is three times higher in July than June. Last year, it saw a spike in May - the middle of the national lockdown - followed by a fall the following month.

Bruce Lachter, a psychiatrist at South Pacific Private, said “pre-existing vulnerabilities could be exacerbated by the terrific social stress and emptiness” of a lockdown, even if that lockdown was necessary for public health.

“The apps allow you to have your poker machine or casino on your mobile phone and that accessibility does add to the obvious increased risk that you’re going to relapse,” Dr Lachter said.

Hello Sunday Morning, which supports people to reduce or give up alcohol, has had a 34 per cent jump in visits to the website but this has not translated to new registrations for its flagship Daybreak app.

Dominique Robert-Hendren, the head of clinical innovation and digital health at HSM, said the impact would be felt later in the year.

“If people are drinking more in lockdown, they’re probably not engaging with our services yet but they might in the coming months, when they start to recognise that this is becoming a problem,” she said.

Meanwhile, the Landcare conference later this week will include virtual panel sessions on mental health and the restorative nature of working outside in gardens or bushland.

Gardening Australia’s Costa Georgiadis, who is hosting the conference, said he was spending more time on computers during lockdown and found “days can sometimes just get dissolved” and he would realise it was 4.30pm and he hadn’t been outside.

“What can be a bit tricky about this whole time is that you don’t get to look too far forward because you can’t plan and if you do plan you have to unstitch, but gardening is an opportunity to literally sow a seed for months in the future and you’re looking ahead and not caught in the bog,” he said.

The extension of the Sydney lockdown has also thrown up ethical dilemmas, such as whether to report a neighbour for breaking the rules or whether to prioritise home schooling over your job.

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The Ethics Centre will on Monday relaunch a free ethical phone counselling service called Ethical-call. Anyone can book a free one-hour phone session with one of 20 trained counsellors to help people work through difficult decisions.

Crisis support can be found at Lifeline: (13 11 14 and [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)), the Suicide Call Back Service (1300 659 467 and [suicidecallbackservice.org.au](https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)) and beyondblue (1300 22 4636 and [beyondblue.org.au](https://www.beyondblue.org.au))

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