

## Coronavirus impact on mental health 'seven times' bushfire anxiety

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By [Dana McCauley](#)

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Australians appear to be far more anxious about the deadly coronavirus than they were about the bushfires that raged over summer, leading Beyond Blue to warn the global pandemic may result in a spike in suicides.

"We are seeing an increasing number of calls, web chats and emails about COVID-19," Beyond Blue chief executive Georgie Harman told the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.



The coronavirus is causing a spike in anxiety.

"There's been a four-fold increase in contacts directly related to the virus since early March ... it's a grave concern because it's reflective of the significant and quite valid anxiety that the community is feeling right now."

Beyond Blue's 'Coping during the Coronavirus outbreak' thread on its online discussion forum had received a record average 2000 hits per day, Ms Harman said - seven times more than a similar thread set up during the summer bushfires.

The coronavirus pandemic "has shifted everything we do in our daily lives", she said.

"I'm not going to meet with my friends for coffee, going to the gym to train with others. My kids are at home, I'm struggling to figure out how to work remotely and I can't go down to the local club or pub ... the things that give us joy and meaning and structure and connection are just no more."

About one in four inquiries to Beyond Blue were now related to the virus, she said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison is consulting with mental health peak bodies on a package to support Australians who are struggling with the coronavirus.

Ms Harman said Australia was at risk of a spike in suicides due to the pandemic, citing overseas research about previous infectious disease crises.

"But if we get this right, if we do a lot of preventative work now, we can stop that."

She said mentally unwell Australians needed "quick access to empathetic, person-centred information, advice and support" delivered online.

"We know that as we lose physical touch with each other, which is absolutely what we have to do, many services are provided face-to-face and we know that a digital-first approach to this has to be the solution."

But, she said, some of the most vulnerable people needing support may not be able to access digital services, calling for "all options" to be explored - including government subsidies to help people get connected.

"It's about digital equity. Some people ... either chose not to connect digitally, because they find it challenging, or they actually can't afford and don't have devices. That's something that we've really got to think through."

Connecting online could help people worried about the pandemic to realise "that they're not alone, that many other people feel the same way", she said.

"We are physically isolated, but socially we must remain very much connected."

**Support is available for those who may be distressed by phoning Lifeline 13 11 14; Mensline 1300 789 978; Kids Helpline 1800 551 800; beyondblue 1300 224 636.**



**Dana McCauley**



Dana is health and industrial relations reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.