

# LOCAL NEWS

## The psychological toll of COVID-19

**Health.** Although many Montrealers are justifiably concerned about the toll COVID-19 is taking on physical health, psychologists are urging residents not to underestimate the implications the pandemic will have on mental health as well.



DANIEL SUCAR

"We're seeing a situation where a worldwide population is under chronic stress," said Myrtis Fossey, a Saint-Laurent psychologist who specializes in the treatment of anxiety and depression. "We know the long-term effects of chronic stress are quite detrimental to immunity, the nervous system, and the heart."

Evidence of that increased stress can be witnessed in telephone crisis hotlines, which have seen their call volume triple over the past two weeks.

According to Fossey, the



**"Isolation is one of the largest risk factors in mental health. In a time of social isolation, people are really craving social interaction."**

Myrtis Fossey, psychologist

psychological impact of the global pandemic and government-mandated public health measures can manifest themselves in many ways, including paranoia, depression, compulsive behaviour, self-harm, and even suicide.

However, the psychologist asserts that, while these implications are certainly alarming, the greater danger lies in how self-isolation has made it difficult to cope with these negative effects in a healthy way.

"Given that the healthy alternatives to coping with stress – like visiting a friend – are essentially forbidden, the tendency is to turn towards unhealthy alternatives instead," Fossey said, citing how people are now more likely to engage in alcohol and drug consumption during these difficult times.

### Youth at Risk

The psychologist also emphasizes that, while older populations are more vulnerable to the physical risks of COVID-19, younger generations will be

most impacted by the psychological effects of the ordeal.

"Between the ages of 15 and 25 is when we're most social, and when we're forming our identity through social interaction," Fossey said. "Limiting that is very destabilizing for a young mind."

Kayla Pierrotti, an 18-year-old Saint-Laurent resident, said she's had difficulty adjusting to life in isolation.

"Getting out of bed every day is a battle" she said. "Without the support of my friends and extended family, I feel like I'm sinking."

These fears were echoed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who recently urged young Canadians to seek help by reaching out to Kids Help Phone at one of his daily briefings.

"Watching the world you know change radically is a source of anxiety," Trudeau said at the time. "There are people who can help."

### Helpful Tips

In addition to mentioning



Myrtis Fossey is a Saint-Laurent psychologist who urges us to consider the psychological implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and reach out for help over the phone. /123RF

resources such as Suicide Action Montreal and the Order of Psychologists, Fossey recommends getting in touch with therapists who, like her, are offering virtual appointments with their patients. Her other tip? Learning to disconnect from the endless news cycle.

"The only thing more contagious than COVID-19 is fear," she said. "Living by the news from minute-to-minute is a very helpless position that

eradicates hope, because you have no predictive ability and you're constantly on the edge of your seat. The trick is to know when to walk away."

However, she said her best piece of advice to her patients involves focusing on the present, rather than a future that cannot be controlled.

"When we feel distress, we are moving away from the present and oversteering our welcome in a future outcome that

we don't have control over," she said. "The trick is to snap back to the present moment where we have a little control and agency to feel better."

- Myrtis Fossey's office hours and contact information can be found at [myrtisfossey.net](http://myrtisfossey.net). The Kids Help Phone can be reached at 1-800-668-6868.

## Municipal. Borough council goes digital



RUBY IRENE PRATKA

On the evening of April 7, Saint-Laurent mayor Alan DeSousa chaired a borough council meeting, as he does the first Tuesday of every month. The only difference was that his colleagues were all working from home. Like a growing number of meetings and normally public events in these socially distanced times, councils has gone online.

In what the borough mayor called "a first" for council, councillors worked with the IT team to set up a private videoconference meeting and broadcast it via the borough's existing livestreaming platform. Residents, who are normally able to raise questions and concerns, were invited to submit questions by email.

"We wanted to continue to hold the regular meetings, even if we couldn't meet in person, because there were important things we had to decide ...and we wanted to

make sure that residents could pose their questions in a public forum, even though they couldn't be present," DeSousa said.

"We wanted to make the meeting as participatory and transparent as possible, and it was a good first kick at the can."

### riorities

DeSousa said that one of council's main priorities was supporting community organizations in their efforts to assist vulnerable residents during the pandemic. A COVID-19 emergency fund totalling \$50,000 was distributed among seven community organizations.

These organizations, which support renters, distribute food and offer services to young adults in need, are being called upon more than ever, "councillors wrote in a communiqué.

Council also provided 18 community organizations with renewed accreditation and annual funding. and



For the first time, council meeting was not held at the Saint-Laurent townhall. Councillors were at home, broadcasted through a livestreaming platform. /SCREEN CAPTURE

approved plans and estimates for renovations to Raymond Vidal Park, Marcel Laurin Park (installation of new tennis courts) and Alexis Nihon Park (improved lighting).

DeSousa said he and fellow councillors have received positive feedback on the online-only meeting format from constituents. "In an ideal world we

would be able to go back to a public meeting where residents can listen and participate, but we can learn from this [digital format]."

He said council would continue to look at ways to allow residents to participate digitally in local government, even once in-person meetings are able to restart.

### EDUCATION

#### School is in session... on the web

English-speaking students from pre-kindergarten to Secondary 5 can go back to school online thanks to a collaborative effort between the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and the Education Ministry (MEES).

L'école ouverte (Open School) platform was launched by the MEES on March 31 and Télé-Québec's *En classe!* program, exclusively in French, is scheduled to be launched April 13.

Open School does offer access to a range of English-language resources. The EMSB provides weekly suggested schedules on its website with hands-on or research-based activities that students can do with parents or on their own.

"When schools first closed, there wasn't a lot of guidance for parents," says Katherine Korakakis, president of the English Parents' Committee Association, who has two children at home while working full-time.

"Initially, the English content that was available [through Open School] wasn't adequate, but thanks to the

school board, I would say that [English-speaking students] now have equitable access to education."

EMSB spokesperson Michael Cohen says the Open School content was initially developed for both French and English-speaking students, but EMSB consultants have been working on a parallel platform to fill any gaps.

Cohen says the platform was developed by consultants, all former teachers, with support from a web team that "worked around the clock." The platform has drawn interest from students and parents outside the English school system, receiving hundreds of thousands of hits in its first two weeks.

"We're very lucky that we live in 2020," says Cohen. "If this had happened 25 years ago, I don't know what we would have done."

The EMSB is also developing plans for teachers to directly contact parents and students once a week until schools reopen.

RUBY IRENE PRATKA

The EMSB online resources are available at [emsb.qc.ca](http://emsb.qc.ca)