

New Zealand shows strong link between COVID-19 and worsening mental health

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It's important to recognise the vulnerability of those with mood disorders when faced with disruptive situations such as COVID-19



An international study, involving hundreds of New Zealanders, has sparked a call for more public health awareness of the effects of COVID-19 on mood, and for the issue to be taken more seriously.

A researcher from the New Zealand arm of the international study, Professor Richard Porter, Head of the Department of Psychological Medicine, says that amongst study participants previously diagnosed with a mood disorder, nearly 40 per cent self-reported moderate to severe depression during Aotearoa New Zealand's first lockdown period in 2020.

"Our results show there is a definitive link between COVID-related disruption to circadian rhythms and worsening mental health in those with existing mood disorders, namely depression and bipolar disorder," Professor Porter says.

Professor Porter's research team is currently involved in several clinical trials examining practical methods to improve and treat mood disorders.

Psychotherapy is being used to help regulate social and circadian rhythms – with participants recording meal times, social interactions, sleep and waking times, to better scaffold and regularise their activities and support circadian patterns.

The use of light therapy is also being trialled, as well as the use of blue-blocking glasses before sleep to help suppress melatonin secretion.