

# Research volunteers help detect poorer memory in those who were more anxious during pandemic

November 10 2021

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New research suggests older people who were more anxious and depressed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic had an

average decline in their short-term memory equivalent to six years of natural aging. Findings were presented at the Clinical Trials on Alzheimer's Disease Conference in Boston.

## What did the team find?

The team found that participants aged 50 and over who reported an increase in validated measures of anxiety and depression also scored lower on cognitive tasks designed to measure [short term memory](#) and attention. For memory, the decrease was the equivalent to the decline normally seen over six years of natural aging. For attention, the difference was the equivalent of five years of aging.

Researchers from the University of Exeter and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London used volunteers from The Protect Study.

[The PROTECT study](#) is an online cohort of people aged 40 and over, who regularly provide lifestyle information in detailed questionnaires, and take part in cognitive tests. The unique study aims to help researchers understand what factors are involved in how the brain ages, and what can be done to keep our minds healthy in later life.

Researchers were able to use data from the PROTECT study collected over the last five years and look at the impact of the pandemic peak of 2019–2020 in 6,300 people aged 50 and over (the minimum sign-up age at the time of the study).

Dr. Sara Imarisio, Head of Research, at Alzheimer's Research UK said: "While these findings are intriguing, depression and anxiety can often have short-term effects on memory and thinking skills that may not be an indication of future dementia. It will be important to follow up on these findings so that we can understand how these factors play into

participants' brain health in the longer term. The good will and dedication of volunteers from around the UK made this research possible. Volunteering for dementia research can be extremely rewarding and you don't have to have dementia to get involved. Those wanting to volunteer to take part in research like this can do so by ringing Alzheimer's Research UK's Infoline. Contact us on 0300 111 5111 and we will help register people to Join Dementia Research, a national service, where you could match to research studies like this one. To make breakthroughs possible for people with dementia it's vital volunteers take part and help get important research studies off the ground. We saw a record number of people volunteer to take part in research into COVID-19 and we now must do the same to tackle dementia."

Dr. Helen Brooker, of the University of Exeter, led the research. She said: "We found that people who were more anxious and depressed during 2019–20 also saw their short term memory and ability to focus worsen, by the equivalent of five to six years of what we'd expect to see from natural aging. It's likely that key factors were the unprecedented impact of worsening mental health caused by widespread anxiety over the pandemic, and long periods of lockdown. We need to understand this better so we can create effective strategies to support people and preserve both mental health and brain health in future pandemics."

The study used measures of depression and anxiety severity commonly used in clinic. Researchers noted a significant shift in the number of people scoring higher on these scales than previously. Cognitive tests found the largest dip in memory and attention were seen in those whose scores would indicate moderate or higher levels of anxiety and depression.

Prof Dag Aarsland from King's IoPPN said, "Our innovative PROTECT study has enabled us to gain this valuable insight by working with

participants over time. We had five years of [mental health](#) reports and online scores in brain tests, which has enabled us to pinpoint the impact of the pandemic. We will continue to monitor how this plays out over time, so our insights can help us fully understand the impact of this pandemic, to help us prepare for future events on the same scale."

Dr. Anne Corbett, of the University of Exeter, said: "The large number of people who take part in PROTECT and complete our tests and questionnaires are incredibly valuable to helping us understand what really matters in protecting our brain health. Anyone aged 40 or over can sign up to join us. Our research is conducted entirely online, and you would be making a valuable contribution to science."

Provided by Alzheimer's Research UK

Citation: Research volunteers help detect poorer memory in those who were more anxious during pandemic (2021, November 10) retrieved 3 February 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-11-volunteers-poorer-memory-anxious-pandemic.html>

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