

Google search data reveals major panic attack issue, Tulane study shows

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Based on a Google Trends analysis, Tulane psychologists found a major jump in searches related to anxiety, panic attacks and treatments for panic attacks. (Stock photo)

A team of researchers at Tulane University used Google search data to examine trends in mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and based on that search, say panic attacks could be affecting millions.

The study was led by Michael Hoerger, an assistant professor of psychology in the Tulane School of Science and Engineering, and published in the journal [*Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*](#).

The team used Google Trends to analyze an extensive list of mental health-related terms that people searched for before and after the World Health Organization issued a pandemic declaration on March 11, 2020. They found a major jump in searches related to anxiety, panic attacks and treatments for panic attacks, especially remote and self-care techniques, in the weeks following the pandemic declaration.

“Our analyses from shortly after the pandemic declaration are the tip of the iceberg.”

Michael Hoerger, assistant professor of psychology at Tulane

Google Trends allows individuals to examine longitudinal population-level variation in the relative frequency with which people use specific Google search terms. Data are updated in real time and can be examined worldwide.

“Although by no means a ‘window into the soul,’ people’s search terms reflect relatively uncensored desires for information and thus lack many of the biases of traditional self-report surveys,” the study says.

“Google Trends analyses have been used to predict important societal outcomes, such as disease transmission, voting behavior and key economic indicators, and it can also be used to forecast population mental health symptoms and need.”

Panic attacks are characterized by an intense fear and sense of feeling overwhelmed, according to the National Institutes of Mental Health. During a panic attack, people may have a rapid heartbeat, sweat profusely, shake, or experience shortness of breath.

Researchers did not find an uptick in searches for depression, loneliness, abuse and suicidality. But they cautioned that their findings do not necessarily mean that people aren’t experiencing these mental health issues.

Instead, Hoerger said, the data may provide insight into what might be a foreboding of a much larger problem. He described it as a “mental health tsunami” related to unanticipated death, burnout and unemployment.

“Our analyses from shortly after the pandemic declaration are the tip of the iceberg,” Hoerger said. “Over time, we should begin to see a greater decline in societal mental health. This will likely include more depression, PTSD, community violence, suicide and complex bereavement. For each person that dies of COVID, approximately nine close family members are affected, and people will carry that grief for a long time.”

Researchers said continued monitoring of Google Trends may reveal other mental health issues over the long term and not detected in this analysis. “These findings and continued surveillance can guide public mental health initiatives across multiple ecological levels that can mitigate the psychological toll of COVID-19,” the study says.

Besides Hoerger, who is also on the faculty of the Tulane Cancer Center, the research team included Laura M. Perry, Hallie M. Voss and Sanjana Easwar, students in the Tulane Department of Psychology. Sarah Alonzi of the Department of Psychology at Loyola University and James Gerhart of the Department of Psychology at Central Michigan University also participated in the study.